Hegemonic Masculinity in Transition

by

Scott Pearce
DipPWE, BA, BTeach(Sec), MA (Writing&Lit)

Submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Deakin University
March, 2016
I am the author of the thesis entitled: Hegemonic Masculinity in Translation

submitted for the degree of: Doctor of Philosophy

This thesis may be made available for consultation, loan and limited copying in accordance with the Copyright Act 1968.

'I certify that I am the student named below and that the information provided in the form is correct'

Full Name: Scott Pearce

(Please Print)

Signed: 

Signature Redacted by Library

Date: 21.05.2016
DEAKIN UNIVERSITY
CANDIDATE DECLARATION

I certify the following about the thesis entitled (10 word maximum)

__________________________ Hegemonic Masculinity in Transition__________________________

submitted for the degree of ________ Doctor of Philosophy ________

a. I am the creator of all or part of the whole work(s) (including content and layout) and that where reference is made to the work of others, due acknowledgment is given.

b. The work(s) are not in any way a violation or infringement of any copyright, trademark, patent, or other rights whatsoever of any person.

c. That if the work(s) have been commissioned, sponsored or supported by any organisation, I have fulfilled all of the obligations required by such contract or agreement.

d. That any material in the thesis which has been accepted for a degree or diploma by any university or institution is identified in the text.

e. All research integrity requirements have been complied with.

'I certify that I am the student named below and that the information provided in the form is correct'

Full Name: ________________________________ Scott Pearce ________________________________________________________

(Please Print)

Signed: .......................................................... ________________________________

Date: .......................................................... 08-03-2016
Abstract

*Faded yellow by the winter* is a magical realist narrative that explores the transition of hegemonic modes of masculinity in times of social change. The novel is set in rural Australia in the nineties and depicts the decline of local industry and a sports club that both sustain traditional patriarchal hierarchies. The novel examines the trauma that, at a personal and social level, traditional patriarchal hierarchies cause in a modern world.

The exegesis is comprised of three chapters that explore a number of themes raised in the creative work. The first chapter looks at the impact of post-World War II capitalism and social justice movements on patriarchal hierarchies. In particular it focusses on the way such challenges have contested notions of masculinity and femininity and how this has led to a supposed “crisis” of masculinity. The second chapter examines the Western film genre, with a focus on John Ford, as the dominant purveyor of patriarchal hierarchies. This chapter examines the 1962 Ford film *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* as a text that serves to highlight the personal and societal damage that is done when traditional patriarchal hierarchies are destabilised. The third chapter examines the relationship between Westerns and sport and posits that the version of masculinity promoted by male exclusive sports is much the same as those seen in Ford’s Westerns. This chapter also examines how magical realism has been appropriated to promote patriarchal hierarchies to reinstate their necessity. This section is focalised through the 1989 magical realist film *Field of Dreams*. 
faded yellow by the winter
Vic had not thought about the dream for many years. It was a recurring wonder that had visited him from the time he was twelve until just after he turned eighteen. Then it stopped. Now, more than twenty years later, it had returned.

He was surprised by how familiar, how luminous the dream seemed. It began with him in a pitch-dark room shuffling slowly forward. Then a door was opened directly in front of him by a woman he did not know, but whom he had long presumed was emblematic of his mother. He could only see the woman’s back and her silhouette partly obscured the vivid desert outside, its reddish sand littered with patches of coarse flaxen coloured grass. The blue sky above seemed brighter than the sun, its intensity almost painful. In the far distance he could make out an immense sandstone butte, shades darker than the sand. The woman timidly moved forward but he stayed behind her. She paused in the doorway, her left hand reaching up to gently touch the door frame. He had a sense that she was anxious, restless. Then she stepped out onto the veranda of a rough-hewn house. He followed her out but stood away from her. Now he had an unbroken view of his vast surroundings. There were more sandstone buttes, separated by stretches of desert that reached beyond the horizon. He could not turn to look at the woman anymore but he knew she was watching the space between the buttes and he watched it too. He saw a horse and rider approaching and then the dream returned to pitch-dark.
He had never known what to make of it and did not know what to make of it now.

There was gusty rain on the ute’s windscreen, but he opened the driver’s door, stepped out and skipped over to a band of tall pines. A crow, caught in a high draught, crossed over the steep valley and he watched it turn and circle. By and by the crow drifted closer towards the hill from where Vic looked down on the town of Henrithvale. If the clock tower that stood on the edge of town had been in working order, the twelve chimes of midday would have echoed down through the lowlands. From where he stood, Vic could see the sharp ridges behind his farm, but not the farm itself, not the waning white weatherboard house with its red tin roof, or the apple trees that were his charge. The coarse wind seemed to mumble something in his ears and he thought that if he were the crow he could look down and see the old train line, the old station, and his father’s tree near the road that led into the township; but he did not want these things to trouble him now. The crow, Vic thought, would also see the football ground and it would be able to see the township and the Red River that snaked alongside it.

The crow came nearer, trying to find sanctuary in the branches of the pines, but it was driven away by rolling squalls. Vic moved from under the cover of the trees and stood out in the open next to his ute; thick waves of rain battered against him. Up above the crow was patient, moving closer and then, reluctantly, farther away from the branches of the tallest pine. Its wings, stretched out from its body with a slight arch, barely shifted as it waited for the brooding winds to relent. It reminded Vic of a boat, caught in a tremendous ocean swell and unable to reach port, and he, a lone observer, could do nothing more than hope for its safety.

The rain found rhythm, accompanied by the rise and fall of thunder as it
crossed the valley, and with that the winds eased. The crow found refuge in the overhead branches, and although dishevelled it was unharmed. Vic watched as it sat and used its beak to rearrange its feathers and shake off the dusting of rain. He moved back under the cover of the trees where the smell of the pine needles seemed suddenly overwhelming. He rubbed a spot on the trunk where sap had gathered. There was no rain in the town, not yet, and if he were lucky it would pass right over. It had been the wettest winter Henrithvale had seen in nearly two decades; it was good for the orchard, for the dams and for the river but it was too late. He hoped it would hold off until after the game.

Vic took a breath, slow and deliberate, in through his nose so the mix of fresh rain, pine and winter wind would linger in his thoughts for the coming afternoon. This was the place his father had come to in the hours before the liturgy. It was a practice Vic continued. He walked back to the ute parked on the side of the track and looked up at the crow. It rubbed its beak, this side and then the other, on the trunk of the pine. Then it stopped, lifted its head as if hearing some urgent dispatch, and plunged from the branch and into the rising winds. It turned away from Vic and tilted its wings so that it came hurtling back over his head, calling “caw, caw, caw.” Then it hurried towards an avalanche of swirling grey clouds descending from the east.

Vic watched the crow as it dived and then swept towards town, over the green land and empty houses that had been homes in the days when the farms were prosperous. He lost trace of it but kept moving his sight forward so that if the crow kept the same trajectory he could pick it up on the other side of town. For a moment he saw it again as it passed the train line and turned beyond the football ground; then it was gone. The air was cool and the rain, dull and constant, had dampened his clothes but it was nothing that concerned him. He felt ready, as if the ball was in his
hands and the game was won.

By the time the ute found bitumen the rain was gone, and Vic took his foot off the accelerator and let the ute roll down the sharp decline towards the township. His game bag was on the seat next to him and his left hand rested reassuringly on top of it. He passed the Avenue of Honour, twenty-eight trees, Scarlet Oaks and Sugar Maples, planted to honour the twenty-eight Henrithvale men that had fallen in the Great War, most of them at Pozieres. Two of the trees were planted for his two great uncles; they stood next to each other, one leaning to the left and the other to the right. When in bloom the foliage of one could not be distinguished from the other. There should have been one for his great-grandfather, so his grandfather had told him on ANZAC Day some thirty-five years ago. “My father, your great-grandfather, the man yer named for, he got through the war alright, a few cuts and scrapes. It was the peace that got ‘im.” His grandfather, his face weathered and muddied with stubble, had looked solemn, but as a boy Vic never understood what he meant. When Vic was eight he had climbed one of the trees and his grandfather bellowed at him to get down and then hit him, open palm, behind his left ear.

“Don’t you ever climb in that bloody tree again or by God you’ll know all about it!” It was Vic’s mother who explained that the trees were to honour those who had died in war, and that sometimes the living are beholden to the dead. The trees were bare now, tired, but Brian Enan made sure that the plaques were sharp and clean and that every ANZAC day, every Remembrance Day, each one had a poppy.

Beyond the Avenue of Honour the road levelled out and the school was on the right; a three-room red-brick building in which he had spent his school years. It had
been built to replace the one that burned down in the fires that nearly ruined the town back in the 1930s. Outbuildings, a playground and cricket nets had been added in the decades since he was forced to go there. Now it was a school for his daughters, Emily and Sarah.

However, for the past seven months, at least once a week, he had found himself spending his evenings back in the school. Led by Brian Enan, he and the town’s other farmers sat on comically small chairs and spent hours discussing the government decision to requisition the water leases that irrigated their farms. Each week they tended to the idea that the decision could be reversed, and worked earnestly to cultivate opposition. Vic wasn’t convinced that there was anything to be done, but Brian Enan, as president of The Henrithvale Grower’s Association, thought the meetings would keep the farmers united. Accompanying the plan to requisition irrigation leases there had been offers, substantial offers, to buy all the farms in the area. There were rumours a dam was coming. Henrithvale wasn’t the first town to which this had happened; there had been others further up the valley that had already been devastated. Those individuals who didn’t sell, those who would not relent, were worn down like rocks on the shore. In its one-hundred-and-forty-years Henrithvale had survived drought, fire, two world wars, and New Zealand imports that cut the value of their fruit. The people of Henrithvale had always endured.

Vic rounded the wide road that took him into the town proper. The rain hadn’t touched the streets but the sunshine was frail, uneasy. None of the shops were open, but there were people moving along the streets in maroon vestments, on their way to the football ground. Vic stopped the ute on the side of the road and went into the general store. There was a ‘closed’ sign on the door, but it wasn’t locked.

“Jack?” He called. “Ya there Jack?” From the rear of the shop Herbert
Hancock appeared. Herbert had been called Jack his entire life, for his father and grandfather were both named Herbert. A short lean man in his late seventies, Herbert was nearly twice Vic’s age but he did not seem to Vic to look much different than he did twenty or even twenty-five years ago.

“Here he is!” Herbert smiled. “The man to bring sporting glory to all in Henrithvale!”

“I’ll be happy to get a kick, Jack.”

Herbert had always encouraged Vic no matter what the endeavour. When Vic was ten he had, momentarily, wanted to be an archaeologist. Herbert had ordered three different archaeology magazines and displayed them near the door. When Vic came in after school Herbert greeted him with, “Here he is, the next Howard Carter!”

Herbert knew how much Vic prized football and he had wanted him to leave Henrithvale to follow his passion. Vic’s father, John, had spent a preseason training with Collingwood, The Purloiners, as Herbert called them. He came back home a few weeks before the season was to begin and broke his leg in a motorbike accident. The leg wasn’t set properly and when it healed it wouldn’t stand up to professional training. It didn’t stop him from playing country football, but it meant he would never go any further. Vic could remember the way his father’s leg would swell after a match, and the way he would hobble around the house with ice, wrapped in towels, strapped to his ankle and tibia.

Vic appreciated Herbert more now than he did as a child. He made the impossible seem possible with a few words.

“How’s Edna?” Vic asked, as he scanned the musky room and leaned against the counter. Edna, Herbert’s wife, had cancer in her lungs after decades of cigarettes. The woody smell of her tobacco pouch made Vic feel secure. She had been through
two chemotherapy treatments and two operations in the last ten years. The cancer
would go, but it always came back. Vic knew that Edna had come home from hospital
the day before.

“Long drive, you know how it is.” Herbert shuffled magazines about on the
shelves. “She’ll be up and around soon enough. She’s upstairs, otherwise we’d be at
the game.”

“I’ll drop in after; let ya know how things went.” Vic looked around the room.

“You need anything, Jack?”

“How about a few more hours in the day?” Herbert smiled. He let the
magazines alone and turned to face Vic. “Any more news on the farm?”

“Nothin’. Brian reckons they’re tryin’ to scare us out. He reckons they won’t
follow through. Offers are generous though, more than you’d expect.”

“No one’s selling?”

“Brian thinks if we stick it out they’ll leave us alone.”

“It’s in the papers you know, all the way down in the city. I didn’t think
anybody would know where Henrithvale even was. Look at this.” Herbert shuffled in
behind the counter and pulled a copy of *The Melbourne Advertiser* from a low shelf.
The front page headline read, “Government faces increasing scrutiny over water
buyback scheme.”

“Haven’t read it.” Vic said taking the paper from him and studying the article.

“It says there is a lack of transparency in government motives. Who would’ve
imagined it, politicians up to no good!” Herbert laughed and cradled his jaw with his
left hand. “Show it to Brian.”

“Alright, Jack, no worries.” Vic held the paper up in salute, walked outside
and climbed back in the ute. He looked at himself in the rear-vision mirror, catching
sight of the church across the road from the store, its windows boarded shut. It had been closed for more than twenty years. When Vic was younger it had been a meeting place; on Saturdays people gathered in the stand to watch Henrithvale play football, and on Sundays they gathered to hear the word of God. Herbert told him, when the church closed and services were moved to a bigger regional town, that God couldn’t compete with football, that a person could not worship in two different houses. He said: “God tells you how life should be lived and football shows you how life is lived.”

Vic drove slowly through town, and rounded a slight rise. The Royal Mail Hotel, positioned as it was across the road from the football ground, was doing good business despite the early hour. The hotel, an enormous two storey building with wide covered verandas and a dome was a lasting reminder of the gold rush boom of the 1850s. The gold rush established Henrithvale; there had been rich mines in the area that attracted people from around the world. At its height Henrithvale had twenty-six hotels, two train stations and a population estimated at twelve thousand. Now there was one hotel and the train line was no longer in use. The mines, those that were known, served as a curious attraction to passing tourists. Vic had often frequented the mines with Dave Foster when he was younger. There were other remnants of the gold rush too. Plaques commemorated the Chinese cemetery, a mine collapse that killed thirty-two, and the site of the town’s first and only newspaper. There were stories too, wrapped in the lineage of those, like him, who could trace their forebears back to that time; stories of great fortunes lost and won, and of Irish Catholics and Protestants warring in the mines so that the town introduced a strictly enforced “no Irish” policy. Vic’s grandfather told him some families were turned out of their homes or burned out, and left with only what they could carry.
Vic gave the car horn two quick taps, and the regulars on the second storey balcony of the Royal Mail waved. When he was growing up the front bar was nicknamed “John’s Place” after his father. He still heard people say, “I’m off to see John,” when they were going for a drink.

Vic turned left onto a narrow road that sloped towards the ground. There was someone collecting an entrance fee and cars were lined up. Vic didn’t mind the wait; it gave him an opportunity to look over the playing field. Cars had already encircled the oval. On the far side, the Henrithvale Town Stand appeared near full. The football season had been a farce, a mockery of what it had once been. The Western Football League had boasted sixteen teams back in the early 1970s, but now the towns around Henrithvale were dying and their football teams were going with them. Last season there had been six teams in the league, but four teams had merged into two and that left the current league with four teams in total. They played each other three times with five byes to fill out the season.

Henrithvale had finished second on the ladder with six wins and three losses; although two of those six wins had been by forfeit. If they could beat Newfront today, they would play in a Grand Final for the first time in twenty-two years.

Vic wanted to win a Grand Final more than he wanted anything else. His father had played in ten, winning eight, including six in a row. He had seen each one. He had watched his father hold the premiership cup high above his head and remembered the jubilation and the fervour of those around him. It was a transcendent feeling that made him better than he thought he could be. All the unbearable struggles, all the weight, had been cast aside, cleansed, and forgiven, even if just for a moment.
Brian Enan worked the gate, selling entry tickets to cars and to those on foot as if he were offering absolution. He had been a striking ruckman from the late 1950s through to the late 1970s when Henrithvale had been dominant. Then a building accident shattered the bones in his left leg. They were held together with metal pins and he had no flexibility at the knee. Now he was overweight, slow moving, but always busy and always in a shirt and tie. He favoured light-blue shirts, short sleeved, almost transparent, and broad brownish ties. He wore small square glasses with a bluish coloured tint and had his hair cut on the last Friday of every month. His nickname was Clock, although no one called him that anymore. He coached the football team, was club president and was president of The Henrithvale Grower’s Association. Vic had known Brian his entire life, but he barely knew him at all.

Vic eased the ute down to where Brian was standing and rolled down his window. The air was warmer, littered with noise and the distant blur of the distorted public address system.

“Are we that hard up, Brian, you’ve gotta coach as well as sell tickets?” Vic grinned, but Brian did not.

“Well, just for the moment, yes, we are. I had Master Mathews here, but he has taken off to who knows where, and people were getting in without charge.” As Brian finished speaking, a boy with hunched shoulders walked quickly towards the gate. “Well, here is the young man in question,” Brian began but the boy did not
respond. Brian turned his attention to the boy. “When you are entrusted with a task like this, you are given a responsibility, and it becomes a measure of your character,” Brian instructed. “I am relying on you, and so is everyone else in Henrithvale.”

“Sorry, Mr Enan, I had to go to the toilet.” The boy didn’t make eye contact. Brian watched him for a moment.

“Be that as it may, Master Mathews, you have a job to do …” Brian was interrupted by the sound of a car horn, and Vic could see in the rear view mirror there were three more cars waiting behind him. “Now, you have got another chance, young man, don’t make me sorry I gave it to you,” Brian said, and handed the boy a coin pouch and a ticket book.

“C’mon, Brian, get in.” Vic called and Brian hobbled around to the passenger door. As he did Vic handed the boy, no more than twelve, a five dollar note.

“There’s two dollars for parking and three dollars for you.” The boy smiled. Vic pulled his game bag over onto on his lap before Brian sunk down on the seat.

“You’ve rewarded the boy for not doing his job,” Brian complained.

“Have a look at what’s on the dash,” Vic said gesturing with a nod of his head. Brian leant forward and picked up the paper Herbert had given Vic. He held it up directly in front of his glasses.

“Yes, well, it’s not unexpected. They are no doubt feeling the pressure, and there is no politician, never has been and never will be, that can withstand pressure.”

“Gives us somethin’ to smile about.”

“Make no mistake here, Vic,” Brian said pointedly, “they are looking for us to quietly go away. But we need to put it aside for this afternoon and focus on the task at hand.” He folded the paper and put it back on the dash. It had been Brian’s organisation and unabated faith that had drawn the farmers together. He had spoken of
little else to anyone, whether they wanted to hear it or not, since news of the water requisition first became known.

Vic normally parked next to the stand, but because the spaces there were taken, he turned the ute towards the back of the stand.

“Didn’t think we’d get this many,” he said easing into a parking spot.

“This is finals football, Vic. We haven’t seen much of it for some time now, but mark my words people have wanted it.”

Brian climbed out of the ute, and Vic followed, holding onto his bag with both hands. To get into the clubrooms they had to walk around to the front of the large open-faced stand. The sun mixed with the stink of beer, liniment and fried food from the tuck shop and reminded Vic, as it always did, of the days, years, he spent here growing up. He would come and watch his father, the great John Morrisson, play while his mother, Glenda, worked in the tuck shop. He wondered if he might find them here somewhere among the crowd.

There were close to five hundred people in the Henrithvale Town Stand, named for the efforts that the entire community made to have it erected in the mid-1920s. It stretched the length of the ground on the eastern side and was built of earth-coloured brick. The roof only covered a third of the seating and on hot days you could hear it buckle and stretch. When it rained the wind would drive the rain in so that it was almost horizontal. There was seating for a thousand people on wooden benches; at least that’s what Vic had always been told. He had been there when it had been full on Grand Final days. He remembered how the roar of noise would swirl around the stand, echo off the tin roof and vibrate through his feet. On rainy days he would sit in the car with his mother and pound on the horn when Henrithvale kicked a goal. The window would fog over and then the game would continue in his head, only he would
no longer be watching the game, he’d be in it, running down the wing and kicking a long goal.

Brian put a hand in the middle of Vic’s back and nodded towards the race that led to the clubrooms under the stand. Vic understood and walked on, while Brian turned to engage in conversation with supporters. As he reached the race, Vic heard a few voices call, “c’mon, Little John.” Whenever he did something on the field that reminded people of his father he would hear something like that, but he wasn’t the player, wasn’t the man, his father had been, not even close.

His father had been tall and solid, but also quick and agile. He was a fearless player, the type people remembered and talked about for years after having seen him play. Vic was less than six foot tall, thickset and slow moving, and he struggled to read the ball. His father could see the red oblong-shaped ball leave someone’s boot and know just where it would land, how it would bounce and what he had to do to get the ball before anyone else. It wasn’t something you could learn, it was just something you had, something inside you, something that made you better. Vic was reliable, he had some good games, but Little John was not a name that he wanted, not a name he deserved.

In the clubrooms under the stand, preparations had started. Years ago there was someone to do the strapping, making sure ankles, knees and shoulders would get through another game. Now players strapped themselves or strapped each other and they moved about in various stages of readiness. Vic sat on the bench that lined the walls and dropped his bag at his feet. The air weighed down by heat rub; a homemade mixture of eucalyptus, tea tree, peppermint and something else he couldn’t distinguish.

When his father played, Henrithvale had two teams, seniors and reserves. Now
they struggled to make up the twenty-two players for a single team. Vic looked at the players around him. At forty-two years of age, he was more than twenty-five years older than the Pattison boys, Adam and Dean, neither of whom had finished high school. Yet he was still sixteen years younger than Doc, who would say at the end of each season that he was retiring but had not been able to convince himself of it. Here they all were on the same team, wearing the same maroon jumper with a blue yoke covering the shoulders and the HFC logo on the front.

Vic wondered if the other players—many of them farmers like him—were feeling as distracted as he was. It was unusual for Vic not to think obsessively about a game. Football season was a plague of habitual contemplations. Even during those seasons when they hadn’t won a single game, when there had been too few players to put up any resistance, there was still a hopefulness inside him. Vic knew that the water leases should be more important than a game of football. He knew that the loss of the water leases would ruin families, ruin the town, but the longer he sat in the clubrooms the further away all those concerns strayed, and he felt as if he were leaving some wretched place behind. Vic knew that it was the same for everyone else. They were deciding, without saying so, to breathe in this day, and this day only.

Dave Foster sat down next to Vic and looked around the room. Dave had property next door to Vic. They had both grown up as only children and had known each other since their mothers shared a maternity ward. When they were younger Dave had been a willing follower of Vic’s imagination. They had explored mines that they had promised to stay away from, they had camped and fished together on weekends and school holidays, and they had talked endlessly about what it would be like to be a footballer on TV. In their mid-teens they broke away from each other, not too far, but there was enough distance now that they rarely spoke of anything other
than football or farming.

Dave’s round shoulders and swollen belly disguised his dexterity, his love of a physical contest. His acne scarred face, busy eyes and ruffled hair had barely changed in all the time Vic could remember. Vic knew him by smell, a sweet mix of warm sweat and cheap deodorant. His arms were thick and strong, coloured by weathered tattoos and too much time outdoors.

“What d’ya reckon?” Dave said. “Might finally have somethin’ ta show for the past twenty somethin’ years.” Dave pulled off his t-shirt and wormed his way into his tight-fitting maroon jumper. “Fuckin’ thing has shrunk.” His voice was always louder than it needed to be.

“Didn’t we win somethin’ in the juniors?” Vic asked, although he knew they hadn’t.

“Nah, that was bullshit. They did the round-robin tournament with ten teams and gave everyone somethin’. We never won nothin’.”

“Didn’t I kick ten goals, take a big grab and win us the game?” Vic asked, letting himself smile.

“Ha ha, fuckin’ hilarious,” Dave’s said. “After you did that my ten inch dick took care of the netball team.” He rolled the jumper over his stomach and sighed heavily. “It’s a Grand Final if we win this today,” he stated. “That’s somethin’ we’ve never had.” Dave stood up and took off his pants. “Hope the shorts haven’ gone the same way as this fuckin’ jumper.”

“There has always been plenty of room in your shorts, Dave,” Doc declared and there was a brief pause in the exchange.

“Homo,” Dave responded. Doc, Steve Wallace, had never been able to master clubroom clowning. He was the fittest person Vic had ever known. He was the only
vet in the district and he spent most of his days on the road. At the end of the year he was moving his practice to Bendigo but would still service the area when he could. There just wasn’t the work in the Henrithvale district anymore.

“If it was a two team competition they’d still fill the stands,” Doc offered.

Vic leaned back against the wall and thought out loud.

“Doesn’t seem real.” He watched Dave struggle into his shorts.

“I’m gonna bust a fuckin’ nut in these things.” Dave’s face looked pained.

“Maybe someone’s got spares.” He hobbled away and Vic got changed.

The room came to an informal order when Brian Enan entered, and Vic joined the players as they stretched and laughed their way through shadow boxing. Vic stole, gently, the actions of those around him. Peter Weston, the field umpire for the coming game, came in to check fingernails and boots. He lived in Henrithvale and had played junior football with Vic and Dave, but when he lost a kidney in his teens he took to umpiring.

Brian Enan, with help from Dave, stood on a chair next to a chalkboard and the room quieted. The players pushed in close. Vic stood on the outside of the group. Under Brian’s guidance they revised their game plan on the chalkboard Brian was so fond of: move the ball quickly, play-on at every opportunity, do the team thing.

“You’ve all heard it before; a week can be a long time in football. And a single game can be the beginning or end of what you might have worked years to achieve.” He clasped his hands together so they made a muffled clap. “I shouldn’t have to tell you what is at stake today. It’s been a tough year for Henrithvale, it’s been a tough two decades for this club.”

Brian’s voice became resolute, his words coming in short outbursts. “There are people, and I don’t need to name names.” His face was flushed red. “They think
Henrithvale is finished! They think we should pack up shop and go home!”

Vic could feel the players absorbing Brian’s words. Their voices answered back, “No! C’mon, Maroons!”

“What happens today,” Brian demanded, “is that we show them and everybody else just how wrong they are! Just what Henrithvale is made of.”

Vic looked up at the photo of his father that watched over the room. Next to it was the honour board with a list of the club champions, back when they still gave the award out. His father’s name was there fourteen times. Vic wore the same number on his back as his father, number seven. Today, he needed some of his father’s skill, some of his courage.

He was moving before he was ready. He was part of the whole, pushed through the clubrooms with the others, down the race and outside onto the ground. The crowd cheered and car horns trumpeted. The ground was soft and familiar, and smelled of newly cut grass and fresh earth. The sky, a dirty white, seemed like it might hold the rain off.

The players spread out, going through their drills and then Newfront came out, a team Henrithvale had beaten twice already during the year, mainly because they were not able to field a full team. They had played both times with fifteen on the field instead of the regular eighteen and with no one on the bench. Today would be different; Newfront looked ready, for they too had seen little success over the years, and this was also their day of possibilities. There was no rivalry to speak of, no real animosity. Newfront, after all, was just a variation of Henrithvale.

Vic moved down into the forward pocket. He watched Dave make his way into the centre and deliberately knock into Newfront players, looking for the contact, wanting them to know he wasn’t afraid. The air was clean, sharp and sweet.
When the teams were set Peter Weston bounced the ball in the centre of the ground to start the game, and it echoed like a single beat on a great drum. Straight away Adam Pattison tapped the ball down to Dave, who kicked quickly into the forward line. Doc, attempting to mark, was taken high. He took the free from forty-five metres out and kicked the first goal of the match before thirty seconds had passed. Vic found himself running towards the huddle of Maroons that had gathered around Doc, pushing into each other, urging each other on. The first quarter went their way. Adam Pattison dominated in the ruck, Dave Foster moved the ball forward and Vic provided decoy leads and shepherds to make room for Doc who was marking strongly. At the end of the quarter they had kicked eight goals and were up by seven. Vic hadn’t touched the ball.

At the quarter-time huddle the crowd flowed from the stand and onto the ground, surrounding the players. Vic felt their presence around him like a rising pressure. It was as if they wanted to absorb something from the moment, something they could not articulate, something they did not know. Brian Enan started to speak; he was focussed and confident in his game plan. His tie lifted and turned in the breeze.

“Alright, we are moving terrifically. Doc is getting plenty of the ball.” Voices called out encouragement: “C’mon Doc.”

“Now,” Brian continued, “we need to start to look for other options. They’ll look to shut Doc down; we need to let them think we’ll look to him every time we go forward. We won’t. Dave Foster, you’ll rest this quarter in the forward half and young Pattison, the Adam variety, will go back. That puts Dean in the ruck. Vic, come off and have a rest.”

Vic knew it was coming; it was always the same. Brian almost ran to the
coach’s box, a small wooden shelter at the edge of the field. Vic watched him: the way he tried to move, he didn’t want to coach he wanted to play.

Vic walked to the bench as the game recommenced. Vic was always a better player before a game when there was a chance to do the things he had so long imagined he could do. Years ago, John Smith, the rover who played with his father said to him, “One day you’ll find yer game. Everythin’ you’ve been lookin’ for will be there. Just keep lookin’.” It was a good philosophy; Vic liked it because every week was one more chance. The cool air made him shudder.

From the bench he could hear the noise from the stand rising like a storm about to engulf the players. Henrithvale kicked the first two goals of the quarter and then Newfront kicked five in a row.

At half-time Henrithvale still had a solid lead. The players paused near the boundary line before entering the race to the clubrooms. Vic stood away from the huddle, stretching his hamstrings, so that it seemed his choice to be apart. Dave addressed the group.

“We dropped our heads. The game’s not fuckin’ over yet. Don’t start thinkin’ about what happens next week. Think about right here, right fuckin’ now.”

“C’mon Maroons!” Vic encouraged. It sounded odd, poorly timed. He moved closer to the huddle but could not bring himself to lean in on the other players.

“These cunts are weak.” Dave described every team that Henrithvale played in this same way. “When we wanted the ball they didn’t get near it. They kicked goals coz we fuckin’ let them!”

Brian Enan stood on the outskirts of the group and when Dave had finished he waved the players up the race for the half-time break. Vic was last in; a fraud, an intruder. As he sat down on the bench he could feel the photo of his father looking
down on him, wanting him to do better. He wanted it himself, but desire was never enough to make anything real.

Dave had squeezed out of his jumper and was standing bare-chested, eating an orange quarter. He was breathing heavily, his left hand on his hip. He looked down at Vic.

“We need you in the second half, Vic.” Dave held the orange quarter in his mouth and squeezed both of Vic’s shoulders with his huge hands.

“Yeah.” He tried to be enthusiastic, but his response was stiff.

“Alright, up and about. Let’s get ready,” Brian instructed. Vic and the other players were up on their feet, running on the spot, calling out encouragement, urging each other to another effort. “In tight,” Brian commanded, and the players pushed in so close that Brian’s face was no more than a few inches away from their own faces. Vic was in the middle, Dave’s arm across his shoulder.

“We know what we need to do. In this quarter we shut the gate and put the result beyond hope. Don’t let the horse bolt.”

Vic and the players echoed Brian’s words.

“Lift Maroons. C’mon!” Vic closed his eyes and hoped.

The third quarter started with Vic back on the field working to protect Doc. The ground was rough and the smell of turned earth reminded Vic of fragmented dreams that haunted him during his childhood. He was on a football field, chasing a ball, opposition players closing in on him, but he could not run, could not run fast enough, and could not do what John did. The air was cold, he rubbed some dirt between his hands; the rain was close.
Newfront were more determined now. They took control in the centre. Adam Pattison was tiring and couldn’t give the Henrithvale midfield first use of the ball. Vic could feel the shift; he sensed it in the way the Newfront players were breathing. They were no longer wheezing but drawing in long and coarse snorts of air. Newfront kicked an early goal and a few minutes later added another.

The runner came out to Vic; it was the Mathews boy that Vic had seen working the gate.

“Coach says move up to the centre, create space for Dave.” He looked at Vic waiting for an answer.

Vic winked and ran up to the wing and waited for the bounce of the ball to restart play. Dave saw him and pointed to a Newfront midfielder who had started to control clearances from the centre. When the ball was bounced Vic hesitated and then came straight in, dropping his shoulder just as the Newfront player reached for the ball. Dave was behind him to stop him turning away. Vic felt his shoulder go in under the Newfront player’s ribcage and lift him from the ground. The player dropped the ball, and Dean Pattison scooped it up. He took two bounces and kicked a long goal.

The Newfront player, lying flat on his back, didn’t move; Vic could hear him trying to suck air into his lungs. Someone grabbed Vic from behind and pushed his face into the muddy ground. He could taste its richness, its heaviness. He couldn’t see what was happening, but he knew. Players from both teams wrestled and pushed at each other near the fallen Newfront player.

Vic clawed at the arm around his neck. Then he heard Dave’s voice.

“Fuckin’ cunt!” The arm and the offending player were gone. Vic rolled onto his back as Peter Weston manoeuvred in with exaggerated movements to separate the teams as they continued to shove and threaten each other. The Newfront ruckman, a
long haired, thick bearded Viking, pointed at Vic.

“Report that fuckin’ prick!” he demanded.

“It was a fair bump,” Peter responded, but there was uncertainty in his eyes.

“Bullshit!”

Vic stood up.

“That’s abuse,” Peter interjected. “Anymore and you’re off.”

The two teams continued to jostle. Peter yelled: “I’m going to bounce this bloody ball. You can either play football or you can take this elsewhere.” He blew his whistle to signal time on and the players scattered back to position. The Newfront midfielder, supported by trainers, left the ground.

“Vic, stay on the wing and run forward,” Dave instructed in a low voice. The ball bounced high from the centre circle and the Newfront ruckman went straight into Adam Pattison without looking at the ball, knee to the hip, giving away a free kick. Dave picked up the loose ball and ran out wide.

“Advantage! Advantage!” Peter Weston called. Vic sprinted forward in an arc. He felt strong and warm; his hands were dry and ready for the ball. Doc led out towards Dave taking the defenders with him. Dave kicked a high ball that cleared Doc and bounced in front of Vic. He gathered the ball, took a step and put through an easy goal from fifteen metres out. It was the third goal he had kicked that season.

His hands clenched into fists before he was overwhelmed by his team mates. They grabbed hold of him, as if he had surfaced after being under water for too long.

The game turned again. Henrhivale added three more goals and led by six at the end of the third quarter. The game was lost for Newfront and the players on both teams knew it. As the Newfront players ran to their huddle Vic could sense the desperation in their voices. They called to each other: “We’re still in this!” “Lift your
heads!” They had to say it, Vic knew. He had done the same thing many times. You had to pretend you could win, even when you knew that you wouldn’t. You said those things for your team mates.

The Henrithvale huddle was as jovial as Vic had ever seen. Players patted each other on the back, and re-enacted moments from the quarter. Brian Enan wasn’t impressed.

“Just in case any of you have forgotten, this is a four quarter game! Enough of this rot, and a bit more focus. This is still a game to lose. Don’t be remembered as the idiots that got so far in front they couldn’t possibly lose, and then managed to do just that.”

The players were quiet. They crowded in around Brian, and the people of Henrithvale came in waves from the stand, once again surrounding the players with their own desire to win.

The day changed colour and Vic felt the first fat drops of rain, and noticed bloated clouds had flooded the sky. The last quarter would be wet. It would slow the play, working to their advantage. Brian’s words were now competing against furious thunder. The siren went to signal for players to move into position.

“Finish what you started!” Brian demanded, and the rain roared down from the sky.

As the last quarter started, the rain, without rhythm, made it difficult to see and the ball barely shifted from the centre. Occasionally it flowed into the Henrithvale or the Newfront forward line, but then it slipped back the other way. The players were bogged down. The ball was too slippery to pick up and too water logged to travel any great distance. Neither team scored for twenty minutes. It would be a Henrithvale victory, it was assured, but it had an anticlimactic feel.
Vic waited in the forward pocket, his opponent next to him. The crowd had pushed to the rear of the stand to avoid the rain. Vic noticed a tall man in a dark grey suit, sheltered by a large black umbrella, had stayed next to the fence. He had a neat grey moustache and he looked familiar, although Vic was not sure why.

Then he saw that the man was not watching the game: he was watching Vic.

Then, suddenly, there were anxious voices and movement. The ball had been shuffled and pushed into the Henrithvale forward line. Vic was slow to react and his opponent led him towards the ball. Dave was coming from the opposite direction, but Dave had no intention of taking possession of the ball. He dived and slid on his belly, swinging his arm at the ball and knocking it further forward. The ball slid past Vic’s opponent and into Vic’s hands. He turned to kick but was encircled by two Newfront opponents. Hurriedly he handballed away and then with five other players set out in pursuit of the ball.

No one could take clean possession and the ball moved closer to the boundary line. Vic had conceded the ball was out of play, but a Newfront player picked it up and managed to get a kick away as Doc slung him to the ground. Doc’s tackle affected the kick and the ball bounced once and landed in Vic’s hands, he kicked hurriedly towards goal, knocked to the ground as he did so. The ball skidded and turned and crossed the goal line to give Henrithvale the only score for the quarter.

Vic was encircled by his team mates; he could hear the car horns, muffled by the rain and thunder, call their approval. For a moment he imagined a younger version of himself watching the game, captivated by the events.

A few minutes later the final siren sounded and the Henrithvale players celebrated as car horns trumpeted their victory. Vic’s opponent, looking soaked and despondent, held out a hand. Vic shook it and ran over to his team mates who were
already embracing each other and making whooping noises. They left the hold of the field with their arms around each other. Dave put his arms around Doc’s neck in playful roughhousing, then kissed Doc’s balding head. As they approached the stand the crowd, now untroubled by the rain, came to meet them, clapping and cheering, calling out to individual players.

Vic heard the calls. “Go, Little John! Go you good thing!”

He walked, head down, up the race and into the clubrooms, feeling, as he always did, a vague uncomfortableness. It didn’t matter what was said he thought to himself. He had played well.

In the dryness of the clubrooms, Vic could see just how wet they were, but it didn’t matter. They formed a circle, arms around each other’s shoulders or waists, feeling each other’s warm, wet skin and smelling the sweat and mud that covered their bodies. Brian Enan, beset by a fury pushed into the middle of the circle and, swinging his arms as if he were a boxer conducting an orchestra, began the song.

“We all stick to the Blue and Maroon.” Vic and the other players joined in with raucous, exuberant voices.

“Win or lose, Henrithvale don't change their tune;
That's the team we hold so dear,
We'll be Premiers this year;
And you'll see us with the Pennant very soon.”

The song finished with a jubilant cheer and the players mobbed Brian so that he soon looked as if he too had been out on the field.

Gradually they settled into their after-match rituals. Dave removed tape from his ankle and shoulder, screwed it into a ball and threw it at Brian. Soon others joined in, Brian scolding them but unable to contain his joy. They relived the moments of the
game they had just played. Doc pointed at Vic and said the game turned when he
“took care” of the Newfront player that had been winning the ball in the middle. Dave
leaned over and affectionately rubbed the back of his head and winked.

Vic smiled and wasn’t sure what to say. He knew the man in the photo on the
wall above would approve, but he could not bring himself to look at it.

Then slowly, individually and in groups, Dave and the other players undressed
and went into the showers, where Vic knew they would stop being together, stop
being the Henrithvale Maroons and return to their normal lives. Vic was the last to go
in; he sat for a long time with his elbows resting on his knees, smiling at the floor as
he replayed the game in his mind.
It was dark, verging on evening, when Vic drove away from the ground. The rain, now morose and cold, led him to wonder if Jane and the girls had come to the game. That morning Jane had made a vague reference to seeing her mother, and he knew better than to ask for clarification. If they had been at the game, Vic thought, Emily and Sarah would have been waiting for him outside the clubrooms as they usually did. He could always count on his daughters to celebrate his efforts in the same enthusiastic and excited way regardless of the score. Jane wasn’t like that.

Vic decided that he would share his triumph with Herbert and Edna.

The general store was closed. A flickering street light threw shadows in through the windows. There was barely any stock on the shelves. Vic tried the door, which was still unlocked, and made his way inside. He called out to Herbert and then ventured into the back of the shop, through a hallway and into the adjoining house.

Herbert and Edna were sitting at a small table in the box-shaped kitchen, resplendent in 1950s décor and complete with a lonely wood burner stove. Herbert was feeding Edna pale, watery soup. Her skin was grey with blue shades. Vic knew she was sick, but this was more than he had expected. Herbert rose when he saw Vic, standing between him and Edna, as if Vic might take her away from him.

“Sit down, Jack, for goodness sake. It’s Vic.” Edna’s voice was still hers; only it was worn down. Herbert relaxed and sat down next to Edna, resting his left hand on top of hers.
“Sit down, Vic,” Edna insisted. “Now, by the hullabaloo going on outside, I think we might have won a game.” Vic smiled and sat down across from Herbert and Edna.

“Yeah, won comfortably, Ed. Rain helped get us home.”

“Well, a bit of rain won’t hurt anybody, will it? Not before time either.” She started to cough and it was as if she couldn’t stop. Herbert put a hand on her back.

“It’s all right, it’s all right,” she said, taking a few cautious breaths. “I’m only dying.”

Vic grinned, but he saw that Herbert could not.

“Hang on for a bit longer will you, Ed?” Vic said, “You’ll see a premiership next week.”

“And I’ll die happy if I do, I can tell you that for nothing.”

When Vic was a boy, Edna was the Henrithvale Football Club matriarch. Herbert and Edna’s youngest child, a boy called Oliver, had been a keen footballer. Vic knew him from a single photograph that was kept in their bedroom. Edna often talked about him, but Herbert never did. He died when he was ten, hit by a car while riding his bike. The car didn’t stop and nobody saw it. It happened the morning after a Henrithvale Grand Final win.

After the boy’s death, Herbert and Edna made the town their focus. It was Edna’s efforts that got the tuck shop built onto the side of the stand. She organised the raffles, washed the jumpers and kept the club prosperous. The year the cancer first hit she was voted club champion. Her name was added to the honour board. There was a picture of her with some of the players on the front page of The Bendigo Advertiser. It was the first time anyone had heard of someone winning such an award without being a player. Nevertheless, aside from Vic and Brian Enan, it was rare that anyone from
the club visited her now.

“What are you doing with that farm of yours, Vic?” Edna asked, seeming to gain strength.

“He’ll sell the bloody thing if he has any sense,” Herbert answered, but there was no drive in his words. He was a tired actor.

“There’s a Grower’s Association meeting tomorrow, Brian thinks if we stick together it’ll work out.”

“Don’t worry about what Brian thinks. What do you think?” Edna had always wanted to know how he saw things or what he thought. When she had been strong she would put her hands on her hips if he did not answer and demand that he share his opinion.

He looked into the bowl of soup cooling in front of Edna and then down at the floor.

“I’ve spent my whole life in Henrithvale. That farm and apples...” His voice softened and disappeared.

“What about Jane and the girls?”

Vic looked up at Edna. “Probably just wait and see.” He leaned back in the chair and folded his arms.

“You just do what’s best, won’t you? Be worried but don’t be afraid.” Edna started coughing again, a shuddering, exhausted sound.

Herbert gently rubbed her back, but there was something in his eyes that frightened Vic. He was sure that this bout would pass just like the others had. Edna had been told before that her time was coming to a close. The doctors had been wrong then; no doubt they were wrong now.

“I’ll head off home, then back to the Royal for a drink.” Vic stood up and held
out a hand to Edna. She took it, and he felt the thinness of her skin, as if it might rip if he pressed too hard. When he took his hand away he could see the points on her hand where his fingertips had been, the swirling reddish purple that would come to a bruise.

His father would have said that it needed ice to keep the swelling away. He used to say that bruises always looked much worse than they were. When the dark reds faded to a jaundiced yellow, he would say there was no real harm done and he would dismiss the injury as if it was not then, nor ever should be, of any consequence.

Outside the rain had maintained its pace and the gutters were flooded, pushing debris to the edge of the road. Vic headed towards the farm; the windscreen wipers scratched and squealed as they were dragged back and forth across the windscreen.

Vic wondered if Jane would be home. He thought about their conversation last night, the same one they had been having for the past seven months. She wanted to sell, take the government offer and move to Bendigo or somewhere near there so she could be closer to her parents. She had moved to Henrithvale when they married, more than ten years ago. She’d had enough now of Vic’s belief that everything would work out. What could he say? He had tried to explain why they needed to stay but she didn’t want to listen.

They were tired conversations in the hours after the girls were asleep, and Vic thought they had both talked the words out of it. She was nineteen when he met her, he was thirty-two. She used to say how much she loved his composure; now she called him remote.

“You can’t make decisions just for you, Vic,” she had said. “You’ve got to make decisions for your family.” She hadn’t mentioned the girls yet, not directly, but it was coming. She would tell him that he needed to think more about them, more
about what they needed. She would tell him that the world had changed and that there were opportunities for them beyond Henrithvale.

It was difficult enough, she said, before the requisition letter: negotiating with the bank to soften repayments on loans for a few months, and putting off the payment of bills. There was never enough money to stop the worry. She couldn’t understand why he was fighting it so hard. The government could force the issue, so why wait? The way she saw it, the requisition was a gift. Here was the government offering him $550,000 to just walk away. What she didn’t seem to understand is that he wouldn’t be just signing away an irrigation lease, but a property and a house that had been in his family for more than a hundred years.

Vic had grown up in Henrithvale on the same farm as his father and his grandfather. The kitchen table had been crafted from local timber by his great-great grandfather and bore the markings of each generation. The table was recognisable in the background of photos taken fifty and even a hundred years ago. He didn’t want to be the one who couldn’t manage, who surrendered all that those who came before him had made. There was something wrong with turning away from that because it was too hard.

And yet, Jane was right and he knew it. The state and federal governments had been elected on a platform of rebuilding the country’s waterways, protecting its forests and finding a new way to generate wealth. The Red River was stressed and in parts further downstream it didn’t flow during summer. The impact on communities beyond Henrithvale had been compelling; there wasn’t enough water for everybody. Now the government was actually doing something with the requisition of irrigation leases all along the Red River. It wasn’t a major river, and Henrithvale wasn’t a big farming community compared to those on the Murray or the Darling. That was no
doubt why the Red River became the focus: it was big enough to make it seem like
something was being done and small enough that impact on primary producers
wouldn’t be significant.

Vic knew that, in the end, it would come down to the farm or Jane. He
thought it was the isolation that had gotten to her more than anything, not just on the
farm but in the town. There were times when he was younger, on school holidays,
when he wouldn’t see anyone else but his mother and John for days. He would fish
the river or scout the old train line that crossed the hills beyond the farm, content in
his own company. These days he could always find something that needed his
attention, something that took him away from the house and made it so he got home
too late.

He knew Jane was lonely; football games, working in the tuck shop and
washing dirty football jumpers had lost their appeal. You could never be a local, never
be of Henrithvale without something that tethered you to the past.

The rain made it hard to see, and the low clouds thickened the darkness.
Lightning on a distant hill illuminated the open fields. He came up over a sharp
incline, where the bitumen lapped at the edge of the gravel road, and then drove down
a long straight stretch. His headlights caught a glimpse of the lone gum, his father’s
tree, some forty metres from the road, monstrous and deformed, an irrevocable mark
on the landscape.

He slowed for a bend and then the road straightened out. He could see the
blurred lights from the house in the night. Jane and the girls were home. Maybe he
was wrong; maybe she had seen the game. Maybe she had taken the girls down to see
the end of it and came home to avoid the rain.

Again lightning erupted from the sky and for a moment Vic thought he saw
two men by the side of the road. They squatted in the long grass, their faces partially covered by broad brimmed hats. Another lightning flash revealed nothing but shifting brush overgrown on the roadside.

Vic took in a breath and shook his head. This was the day he had always wanted; the day he had been waiting for. Henrithvale was into a Grand Final and he was part of it. He wished his father had lived long enough to see it. If they won the cup next Saturday he would take it to the cemetery and show the old man.
Vic turned onto the long driveway that curled first to the right and then the left. The ute’s headlights illuminated the mature apple trees on the right side of the driveway, before turning to the three year old trees on the left-hand side that Vic had hoped would make the farm prosperous. The thunder was working its way down the valley. It began slowly, like seams coming apart, until it surged and echoed off the hills.

The ute eased into the carport at the back of the house. Vic saw glimpses of Jane through the rain blurred kitchen window. She was talking to somebody—though he couldn’t see who. He turned off the engine. The back door opened and a tall man in a dark grey suit stepped out into the porch light. He was sheltered by a large black umbrella. It was the man he had seen earlier, the man who had watched Vic rather than the game.

Vic got out of the ute and stood on the edge of the carport. The tall man walked over and extended his right hand. As if by compulsion Vic clasped it in his own. The tall man’s grip was strong, stronger than he expected. His hands had known labour, they had been strained, nicked and blistered, until they had hardened.

“Mr Morrisson, I presume?” The voice was affable: it had a dull Irish accent that was soothing and melodic.

“That’s right.” Vic leant back on the ute and folded his arms.
“I suppose you might be wondering just what I am doing here at this late hour?” Vic didn’t know how to answer. He stared at the tall man with the same uncomfortable feeling that he had earlier.

“Don’t be alarmed Mr Morrisson, I am William Mulholland. I just came out here to discuss the requisition of the water leases…”

The wind pushed in under the carport and rattled the roof against the frame.

“You’re from the government?” Vic wondered how long he had been speaking to Jane and what she had told him.

“I’m not here to cause any trouble, Mr Morrisson.” He rested the shaft of the umbrella against his shoulder and turned it slowly. “I’m just here to answer any questions you might have regarding the very generous offer that has been made for your land.”

“Didn’t think you blokes worked on Saturday.”

“It’s a unique case Mr Morrisson, and…”

“Call me Vic,” Vic interrupted.

“Certainly.” Mulholland’s smile widened. “As I was saying, as I was just telling Jane,” he gestured back towards the house, “a unique situation requires a unique approach. Now tell me, Mr Morri…—Vic, do you…”

“We’re not interested.” Vic stood up straight and unfolded his arms. It was cold. He could see his breath, could feel the strain of the day’s game awakening in his legs and shoulders. Mulholland’s affable smile remained.

“I am not here to turn any screws, Vic. No doubt there are questions you have that need answers. Jane was certainly interested in possibilities,” he paused for a moment and Vic glanced at the kitchen window. “I think our conversation together has her better prepared.”
“No one’s gunna sell. You can talk to whoever ya want.” Vic’s voice had an unintended edge to it.

“Okay, okay,” Mulholland nodded. “There’s certainly a lot to think about, but Vic, don’t mistake my purpose. I am only here to answer questions.”

“Well, I don’t have any,” Vic lied.

Mulholland seemed strangely pleased. He turned as though to leave, but then, as if unable to resist, crooked his neck to look at Vic. “Do you mind, Vic, I am curious to know something.”

“What?”

“Your family’s been here a long time, haven’t they, Vic?”

“Hundred and fifty years, give or take,” He liked that connection.

“Magnificent history,” Mulholland said and shook his head as if in admiration. Then he looked out into the blackness to take in the landscape. “And you’ve never lived anywhere else? Never wanted to see the world as they say?”

“No really, no.”

“I was born in Belfast, Ireland. Perhaps the accent is a giveaway?” He smiled and Vic smiled too, couldn’t help it. “I left home when I was a lad, just fifteen. Sailed all over the Atlantic for years, gave it up and landed in America. Imagine that, a boy from Belfast joins the navy, sails the Atlantic and ends up in America as a zanjero.”

His eyes settled on Vic, studying him, and Vic felt as if the distance between them was very small. “It’s a big world, Vic; don’t miss your chance to see it. You don’t get another.”

“Maybe one day.” He looked toward the back door. The rain, urged on by the sullen thunder, was becoming heavier.
Mulholland stopped turning the umbrella and lifted the shaft off his shoulder.

“Take those pretty girls of yours and show them the world. They’ll learn more from that than in a classroom, but don’t let me hold you up. I’ll bid you good evening and wish you congratulations on the hard-won game today.”

“No worries.” Vic was tense, but they shook hands again. Mulholland stepped back, reached into the pocket of his waistcoat and took out a pocket watch. He squinted at it, then turned and walked into the haze of rain and dark.

Vic wondered where he had parked, maybe out on the road, but it didn’t matter. He hurried toward the house and pulled the back door open. He took Jane by surprise: she turned to greet him from the kitchen sink with a gasp. Emily and Sarah bounced around him, each with curled blonde hair made wild by a day of play.

“Hi, Daddy,” Sarah said and smiled. “Guess where we went today?”

“Shopping with your mother.” Vic answered quickly looking at Jane and taking in the heavy smell of fish-and-chips, their wrapping stuffed awkwardly into the rubbish bin.

“Hey, how did you know?” Sarah put her index finger to her chin and gazed thoughtfully up at the roof. She was the younger of the two. Now he took his moment.

“What did ya say?” Vic said to Jane, who was drying dishes piled next to the sink.

“How about, ‘Hi Jane, how was your day? Nice to see you.’ That would be a good place to start.” She didn’t take her eyes off the plate that she turned in her hands.

“Daddy, I have new shoes. See?” Emily held up her leg to show Vic.

“Emily, I’m just talkin’ to mum at the moment. You need to say excuse me if…” Jane turned her back to him. He struggled to hide the disquiet in his thoughts.

He felt himself shifting his feet, bracing for the contest.
“Excuse me,” Emily said and smiled at him. He wanted to tell her to go away so he could talk to Jane, but he remembered himself in this very kitchen with his own mother. He knelt down.

“Wow! I bet you could run fast in those.” Vic smiled.

“I can run faster,” Sarah said pushing her foot up onto Vic’s knee so he could see her new sneakers also.

“Not faster than me,” he said, watching Jane.

“I’ll show you what else I got,” Emily said and bolted out of the room to find it.

“Me too,” Sarah agreed and followed her big sister. Vic stood up.

“How was your day?” he asked. Jane turned to face him, after laying her tea towel on the wet dishes.


“Might go back to the Royal Mail, if you’re interested? We’re through to the Grand Final.”

“Oh congratulations!” She moved towards him and gave him kiss on the cheek as if they had just met. “I don’t want to take the girls out in this,” she said, her eyes flicking towards the window. “You go, though.” Emily and Sarah came back in the room carrying their collection of new clothes.

“Look, Daddy.” Emily held up a pink T-shirt with a fairy on the front. She wanted everything to be pink, just like Jane.

“I think the whole town’s there,” Vic said to Jane. “The girls’ll be fine. We’ll take your car.” Vic looked down at the kitchen bench. There were brochures from La Trobe University in Bendigo. Shopping trip is what she had told him in the morning. He picked up a brochure and could feel Jane watching him as he did it. It was about a
nursing degree; something she had mentioned a year or more ago. Thunder rattled the house and the lights wavered, failed and then returned. They were both tense but the girls were not daunted.

“Daddy, look.” Emily was demanding.

“Mine’s green.” Sarah held up her new T-shirt. He watched Jane and she watched the brochure, as he put it back down on the bench, slowly and deliberately.

“Daddy, look!” Emily was irresistible. Vic knelt down in front of her and held up the T-shirt.

“It won’t fit me!” Vic smiled, and Emily giggled. “Maybe green is more my colour.” He took Sarah’s T-shirt, which had butterflies outlined in black, and stood up. “Thanks, girls, I’ll wear it to footy training.” He walked into the lounge room, the girls following and trying to pull the T-shirt from him. They climbed on him as he sat on the couch. He turned the TV on to watch the channel seven football replay. It was Collingwood versus Carlton, two teams he had no interest in.

“Alright girls, ice-cream time,” Jane called and they left Vic alone and scurried back into the kitchen. A few minutes later Jane came into the lounge room and sat on a chair to his left.

“You’re not going to the pub then?”

“Nup, don’t feel like it.” He watched the TV. He could feel her looking at him, but he kept focussed on the TV, blurred by snowy static. She waited a few moments more, shook her head and stood up to leave. Vic spoke. “If you’re goin’ to start talkin’ to people about options,” he said turning the TV off and looking up at her, “you could let me know.”

There was already enough rumour about town. Jane’s discussion with Mulholland would get out; he knew it would. Nobody would say anything directly to
him, but he would see what they were thinking in their sighs, in the pitch of their greetings and the stares when he walked past. It would reach The Grower’s Association, Brian Enan, and others. She should have told Mulholland to come back later; she should have asked Vic what he thought. It would look bad.

“There was an open day in Bendigo. I didn’t know until we got there. Mum said something about it, so I stopped in.” He wasn’t sure for a moment what she was talking about. “I thought we’d get back for the last quarter.” The brochures.

“What did you say to…” Thunder exploded over the house and plunged everything into darkness. They waited, anticipating the lights would return, but they did not. The girls, frightened, called out for Jane, and her voice reassured them as she stumbled back into the kitchen. Vic waited a moment then got up to light candles. A storm would often cut the power. He remembered the joy of it as a kid; the house became a cave to be explored and he was untouchable.
Vic awoke to morning light limping over the windowsill beneath faded bedroom curtains. The bed next to him was empty. Jane must have stayed in with the girls. The rain had stopped, but cold, stale air had settled in the house. He could smell its dampness and age. The phone was ringing, but he didn’t move. “If it’s important, they’ll call back,” his mother would say.

He thought about how in one week he would play in a Grand Final. His thoughts were pulled to the vase in the hall that people often admired and to the last time that Henrithvale had made it to a Grand Final. Vic had still been a boy. His father’s team had lost by six points, a single goal. It was the last game he had ever watched with his mother.

He remembered her lonely face on the drive home. John had stayed back at the club. In the game he had been solid but nothing spectacular. His mother was already sick, but he didn’t know how badly. She had told him that everything would be alright, that it wasn’t serious, that he didn’t need to worry.

John had come home late that night, leaving the headlights on in his ute so that they lit up the edges of Vic’s window. It was the pounding on the unlocked front door, though, that had woken him. He heard his mother’s voice trying to calm John, ushering him to bed and then John’s words, like the sound of something breaking. Then there was the heavy smack of his hand as it hit the side of her head, and she fell
down and knocked the vase off the stand in the hall. She used glue to put it back
together but the cracks were there for everyone to see.

Jane opened the bedroom door, her hair wet from the morning shower and her
face worn from lack of sleep.

“Phone, Vic. It’s Dave. He says there’s a fence down.”

Vic put a few rolls of fencing wire in the back of the ute, and drove along the track on
the furthest side of the farm. Dave had cattle in his top paddock and a break in the
fence could send them into Vic’s orchard. As he drove Vic saw that the storm had
done some damage to the trees, giving him more work to do. He still hadn’t finished
the winter pruning and he knew he would need another month or more to move
through the whole orchard and adjust growth. On some of the older trees there were
weak crotches and interfering branches he hadn’t taken care of last winter. Now there
would be injured wood. He would need to look over every tree.

In past years he had hired help, but there wasn’t the money for it now. He
stopped the ute at the edge of a steep rise and got out. The ground was wet. He left the
ute and continued on foot. He found the fence that separated his property from Dave’s
and walked alongside it over the steep ground. The earth was rocky, the topsoil too
shallow to be of any use. There were patches of blackberry bushes here and there,
rabbit shit and the odd fox paw print in the mud. He had spent a lot of his childhood
on this hill, and down in the gully behind which led to the old railway line and, further
beyond, to some mining relics.

Vic heard Dave’s quad bike and saw him coming up the hill on the other side
of the fence. He watched him come to a stop further up ahead by a large gap in the
fence. The gap was almost ten metres wide, the fence posts and grass were partially burnt, and the wire fencing was frayed and ripped.

“Lightning?” Vic asked as he came up to Dave.

“Or the cows are gettin’ smarter.” Dave squatted down next to a fence post.

“Wood looks alright. Got any wire?”

“In the ute,” Vic signalled back over his shoulder. Dave rode the quad bike through the gap in the fence and kept pace beside Vic as he walked back to the ute.

Vic remembered how, after school, and on weekends or holidays, he and Dave used to regularly come to the hill together. Vic’s imagination in those days had been populated with dragons and elves, wild shoot-outs with horse thieves and treasure maps. Dave had always followed Vic’s lead, wide-eyed with excitement, he and Vic immersed themselves for hours at a time in Vic’s epic tales. They had been kings and warriors, made brave stands and saved nations. Their games, so distinct in Vic’s memory, made him feel awkward now.

“Yer didn’t come back to the pub ya lazy bastard,” Dave said. He had never liked silence.

“Jane was tired; power went out.”

“Yeah.” Dave looked ahead towards the ute. “Hey, guess what Brian wants me to tell ya?” Dave smiled.

“There’s another meetin’ tomorrow?” Vic shook his head. “I should send Jane in my place.”

“Brian’d shit himself,” Dave laughed.

They took the wire off the ute and worked to repair the fence, squatting to avoid kneeling on the muddy ground.
“You had any visitors?” Dave asked as he cut the broken wire away from the fence post.

“Visitors?” Vic wondered if Mulholland was speaking to everyone who was carrying debt. Vic knew that Dave owed money, not as much him, but enough to be worried.

“Ya know, someone stoppin’ over for a bit of a chat. A visitor.”

Vic collected the broken wire from the muddy earth.

“I know what a visitor is.”

“Just checkin’.” Dave moved to the other fence post. “I heard they send someone ‘round to give one or two a better deal than the rest.”

“More money you mean?” Vic asked

“Probably.”

“Nah, no one has offered anything more than was in the letter.” It wasn’t a lie, not yet.

They threaded new lengths of wire and tightened them. Vic watched as Dave strained, his head tilted to one side and his left eye shut tight.

Just as Dave was finishing up, Vic saw there was smoke on the horizon bleeding into the sky as if from the opening of a wound. His eyes followed it as the smoke turned, mutating into half-formed things. The smoke, Vic knew, was from the old station house down through the gully and past the railway cutting. They were back, back at the station house, and he had to go to them. Vic’s hands clenched so he could feel his rough-edged fingernails cut into his palms.

“What?” Dave asked turning to see what had taken Vic’s attention. “Hey, Major Tom?” Dave clicked his fingers in Vic’s face.
“I should see about things,” he mumbled, waving Dave’s hand away as the smoke approached, hunched and lurching.

“Yeah, alright.” Dave hesitated and scratched at his forearms in the way that told Vic he was worried.

“See ya at the meeting,” Vic tried to reassure him.

Dave started the quad bike and rode away. Vic raised a hand to wave him goodbye as tremors moved through his legs. He headed down towards the gully and the steep rail line cutting that he and Dave used to play in as children. He slipped as he began the descent into the gully and then stood up to brush the dirt and burrs from his pants. He had a surreal feeling of falling back in time.

There was a story that he had heard at school, as part of a local history project, about a robbery that took place on the road to Henrithvale in 1869. There was so much gold coming out of the ground in those days that the Bank of Victoria sent a special armed coach every two weeks to collect the gold from the smaller Henrithvale branch and take it to the larger Bendigo branch. Sometimes the coach couldn’t make the journey. During winter the road would be washed away, and the gold would accumulate in the small vault in Henrithvale.

In June of 1869 the coach from Bendigo had been delayed for four weeks. When it finally made the journey and collected the Henrithvale gold it was robbed on the way out of town by two Americans in collusion with three of the guards. The boon was divided in half, the Americans taking their half and riding back into Henrithvale to wait at the train station. A train to Newfront arrived before word of the robbery, and the Americans disappeared. The other half of the gold was taken by the guards but they were caught a few days later and their gold recovered.
Vic had found the station by chance when he was eleven or twelve. It was at once familiar and when he entered nobody was surprised to see him. From that time on he would see the smoke in the sky maybe once or twice a week and then visit the station. Just after he turned nineteen it stopped. He stumbled and picked his way through the blackberry bushes until he found the railway cutting. It had been decades since he had been here. There were times when he could not be at home, times when John, sinister and apish, would look for him. He would come here to the cutting and sometimes beyond to the station house where the two desperadoes had waited for the train. It had been years, decades, since he had been here.

The cutting, Vic saw when he got to the bottom of the gully, was wild and overgrown like some decayed lost city. He followed it as it arched into a forested ravine and then flattened out. A gentle rain came and then went. He could see the station house now and the line of smoke winding from its chimney.

The station house was unchanged: a solid red brick building and bluestone platform. There was always something frightening about being here, but such feelings could not stop him from climbing the steps onto the platform and wondering if anyone was still inside.

Vic hesitated, put his hand on the door and took it away again. Then, unable to stop himself, he opened the door. The hinges on the door creaked and the room had the scent of an old book. He saw them immediately—there just as they had always been. The taller desperado was asleep, stretched out on a corner bench with his hat pushed down over his face, saddle bags at his feet while the other one, small and thin, with a sharp square jaw and a thick moustache, moved nervously about, holding a rifle and checking the windows. He saw Vic come in, watched him a moment, and went back to checking windows.
“Been some time since you come by,” he said and then looked Vic over.

“Don’t look like you starved none neither.” He looked back out of the window. “I suggest you find somethin’ else occupy your time. Things might get interestin’ here real soon.”

Vic turned to leave. He wanted to know why they hadn’t left, if they had been waiting here for him. He reached the door, but before he could push it open the thin desperado spoke again.

“Gonna sell that ranch then, that be the end of it?”

It was the same pattern. There had never been any talking around things, no loose conversation to put him at ease; the only words that were spoken were those that were needed.

Vic held his breath, and then he spoke. “I can stay and go broke or leave and lose everything.” It was as if he had never been away.

“Lose everythin’, you say? That’s a damned way to put it.”

“How would you put it?”

“I wouldn’t make it no all-in hand.” The desperado turned to look at Vic and then turned away again, studying the sky through the window. “No sir, all or nothin’ is bad news.”

“That’s how it is.”

“You think so, huh? Tell you what, move to the other side of the table and get a view of the game from there. You might just see somethin’ a little different.”

The taller desperado shifted in his sleep and mumbled something that Vic couldn’t understand.
“You’d best not wake him. You know, he ain’t the type you wake unless it’s a necessity.” The thin desperado moved quickly from one window to the next. “You take my advice and get goin’.” Vic looked at him. “Go on.”

Vic left the station house, closing the door carefully behind him. The land was vast and empty when seen from the station house, the sky a grey desert, but the air was sweet like water at the end of a long day. He shuddered and there was that same feeling he had known before, every time he left this place, the urge, the need, to run, run and never look back. He stumbled and then he ran, his mouth filling with saliva, the wind bringing tears into his eyes. Behind him Vic could hear the whistle and chug of the train as it neared the station, and despite it all he felt as if something lost had been returned to him.

Vic parked the ute in the carport and went inside the house. Jane was at the kitchen table, reading the brochure from the university open day. The house was quiet.

“Where are the girls?” he asked.

“With the Parker kids. Fence alright?”

“Lightnin’ we reckon.” Vic felt the kettle, still hot, and poured himself a coffee. “That’s your plan then, is it, go off to university?

“I don’t know Vic, what’s your plan?” She sounded tired, the fingers on her left hand massaged her forehead. Vic remembered how blonde her hair had been when they first met. It bounced with life, people often complemented her on it. Now it was faded and limp.

“There’s a meetin’ on tomorrow, probably know more then.”
“What do you think’s going to happen? What do you think we’ll do?” She always emphasised the “you.” He hated it. He sat down at the antique table, letting one hand clench the table leg. His thumbs traced generations of names engraved there. On your tenth birthday tradition held that your name would be carved into one of the legs. His name was there beneath John’s name. Jane stared at him.

“Brian thinks…”

“Brian thinks this, Brian thinks that.” The frustration curled around her words. There wasn’t a single terrible event that had divided them, pushed them apart, but their paths, Vic saw clearly, had diverged. The farm, the girls and the town—they were enough for Vic. He thought it used to be enough for Jane. He thought her restlessness might pass, that as the girls grew up she would find a place for herself the way his mother had. She had tried working in town, with Herbert and Edna, then at the Royal Mail, but it wasn’t enough. Whatever Jane wanted it wasn’t in Henrithvale.

“There are some trees that need to be looked at,” he said, running his right hand along the smooth worn edges of the table.

He finished the coffee, put the cup in the sink and went back to the ute. He drove to where he had seen the storm damage and turned off the engine. If Jane wanted to go, she would go; he didn’t know how to stop her. His mother had talked of leaving, always in a low voice, even when it was just her and Vic in the house alone. She had told him they could just go, that there would be somewhere, somewhere far away where they would be happy. He remembered how John had said to his mother, “I’ll put you under the fuckin’ ground you ever try and leave here again.” Vic had never wanted to leave, but he had wanted John gone, had prayed and begged for it. After his mother passed away John had barely spoken to him. He had slept in the house, and John had stayed wherever he stayed.
Vic remembered how the morning after his mother died, John took a chainsaw and cut down fifteen she-oaks and all the grevilleas so that the house was no longer protected from the wind. That spring and summer there was no rain and the wind circled the house every night like a wailing baritone. Doors and windows shuddered almost constantly as if trying to keep pace. A few days later John took all of his mother’s things, clothes, photos, even the blue curtains she had hand sewn, and burnt them. Vic remembered coming home from school to see everything ablaze and John’s face, red from standing so close to the flames, looking at him as if to say this were his idea and he no longer belonged here. To this day there was barely anything he owned that had been his mother’s, just some Christmas decorations they made one year and put on the front gate. He kept them in a box in the wardrobe.

He sat in the ute and stared out the window. The apple trees were waiting for him, but he settled down low in the threadbare seat. He considered, once more, his options. He could stay and try to make things work, but without irrigation it didn’t make much sense. He could sell, clear the debt, and then what? Stay in Henrithvale and be the bloke that chucked it all in, the one who said he would stand alongside everyone else, and then turned around and did what was best for him? He’d have to move, he knew it. Jane wanted to go to Bendigo, but what would he do there?

He found himself remembering a football game. He must have been ten and John was at his peak. Henrithvale were down by eight goals going into the last quarter. Vic went out on the ground to hear the coach, Jock Stewart, address the players. Jock was in the habit of roaring at the players with such fierceness that it took something out of them. Vic secretly wanted to hear Jock explode, but Jock quietly walked around the players, looking at them as if inspecting stock.
“Yer know what it is keeps a man down?” Jock said. “It’s his thinkin’ he can never get up. Yer goin’ to lose because that’s what yer think yer should do. I can’t say nothin’ to yer that would do yer any good. You’ve got to say it to yerself, each one of yer has got to say it to himself.” Then he walked away, leaving the players standing there.

Nobody moved. It was John who gathered them all together, pulling the players into such a tight huddle that they became indistinguishable from each other. Vic, standing on the outskirts with the crowd, couldn’t hear what John said; he heard only the coarse sound of his voice. The siren sounded to start the last quarter and inside twenty minutes Henrithvale had kicked nine goals. They won the game by eighteen points. It had seemed impossible but then Vic had watched it happen. He remembered it in every game he played. No matter how far behind the team fell or how little he had contributed, he felt there was always a way out.

He got out of the ute into the cool air and moved into the orchard, equipped with bypass shears and a pruning saw. The trees were set out in lines so he knew them by number, by shape and by touch. He kept notes on each one; he trusted them and they, he felt, trusted him. He had shaped and trained them, had helped them recover from John’s tyranny as they had helped him. There was just twenty acres now of mature trees, less than half the acreage of what it had once been. Ten acres of young trees were just coming into their third year but not yet making a profit.

His grandfather, worn and broken from hard work, had told him when he was twelve years old that some people are born to work the land; that it comes naturally to them. Vic was one of those people, his grandfather had said, and John was not. Vic’s grandfather was not afraid of John but he kept his distance. John’s mother, Vic’s grandmother, had abandoned the family when John was eight. She dropped him off at
school one morning and never came back, never called and never wrote a letter. Vic found this out from his mother who had heard it from Edna.

Vic remembered, when he was eleven, watching John hack away at a tree during winter pruning. His grandfather waited until John was done and had sulked away to work on another, and then he went over and rubbed his hand gently over the cut. He said to Vic, “the seed of the apple doesn’t turn out like the tree it came from. It becomes something of its own, sometimes better, sometimes not.” Vic had never forgotten it.

Vic worked with the trees until the light retreated and the air had the smell of night. When he stopped his back ached and so did his thumbs and shoulders. He loaded the prunings into the ute, depositing them with the growing collection near the machinery shed, and drove back to the house.

Jane was outside emptying the rubbish bin as he pulled into the carport. She half-smiled and he half-smiled back. She had lost the shine she had when he first met her; the joy in her voice and spark in her eyes had both been drained away. He felt that she knew it too and he wondered if she blamed him.

“There was a call while you were out,” Jane said as she closed the bin lid.

“Who?” he asked, but she didn’t answer. She just raised her eyebrows and stared a moment until he understood. “Brian Enan.”

“I’ve just about had enough of Brian Enan, Vic.” The frustration from earlier had not left. “He needs to mind his own business.”

“Henrithvale is the only business he has. If he wasn’t doin’ that he wouldn’t be doin’ anything.”

“Well, with any luck, soon enough he won’t have anything left to worry about.” She snapped, heading for the back door.
Vic followed. The girls were home. They were drawing at the kitchen table, and they greeted him with their usual enthusiasm, warming the room that was awash with the smell of rosemary and roast potatoes. Vic loved his daughters but was aware he didn’t know them and didn’t know how he could be anything other than on the fringe of their lives. He had seen them born, changed their nappies, bathed their chicken pox, but they belonged to Jane.
In the morning Vic dropped the girls off at school. The day was cold and overcast but he felt a burgeoning sense of hope and relief. He pretended to fall asleep when he was driving so that the girls would yell out to him to wake up. Acting surprised, he shook his head and straightened the ute. Then he slowed down to walking pace, telling the girls that they were in fact going so fast it made everything seem slow. They laughed and told him he was silly, but he saw them in the rear view mirror, watching him, wanting more.

He started on some stories, things he’d made up, about his time at school, when he had been in the very same rooms that were now their classrooms. He invented a teacher, old Mrs Hugebottom, who was always plotting against the students and trying to steal their lunches. She had a secret dungeon under the school where she forced boys and girls to do maths for days at a time. Vic made himself and Dave the heroes of the stories. They were cunning and clever, and they would always outwit her.

When he pulled the car into the car park at the school he said to the girls, “I think that’s her car. She’s back! Be careful and don’t tell her you know me.” They left the car still giggling.

He spent the whole day in the orchard. The cold made his nose run, but the rain held off. He soothed the trees with his voice, speaking to them of the prosperity to come and the aching sunshine that would leave them drowsy and content. When
dusk settled in he went back to the house and showered. He was turning out of the
driveway for The Grower’s Association meeting when Jane and the girls came home.
They waved as he drove away.

When he was a boy The Henrithvale Grower’s Association would meet once a
month, sometimes twice a month if something significant happened. John was
president until his death and then Brian Enan took over. John had led The Grower’s
Association the same way he had led the football team: he was determined,
unrelenting and successful.

When Vic was ten years old there was a drought that damaged crops, dropped
the yield and threatened to bankrupt a number of farms. The government at the time
talked about reducing or suspending irrigation leases to farmers in the Henrithvale
area, just for a single season. John became The Grower’s Association spokesperson.
He was on TV, talking about how such a move would kill farming in the area forever,
drive up the price of fruit and vegetables, and do nothing to help the river. Then he
pushed for an increase in the allotment each farmer was receiving. John had become
the public face for the push to increase water allotments, but the campaign had
already been underway for some time; it had even been in the papers a few years
earlier. That didn’t matter. All that anybody seemed to remember was that John gave
them more water and a bigger crop, and that meant more money.

As he drove along the empty road into town, Vic remembered how John’s role
in that campaign had been resurrected on the news when he died. The news story
about John’s death showed old footage of him standing in front of the apple trees. The
wind had stirred up dust and flies, and he was squinting and occasionally waving his
right hand in front of his face to keep the flies away from his eyes. The reporter’s
voice-over announced:
“President of The Henrithvale Grower’s Association John Morrisson was killed early yesterday morning when his car left the road and struck a tree near his Henrithvale home.” Then there was a cut to footage of the car, taken from a distance, squashed against a single giant gum. “Morrisson is widely credited with saving farming in the Henrithvale area after his campaign to firstly preserve and then increase irrigation allotments along the Red River was successful.”

After John’s death, the football club wore black armbands every game of the following season. Brian Enan had wanted to change the name of the stand, but the idea had faded quickly. Vic was given his father’s number to wear in the following year, and he always felt an expectation from those that loved the football club that he would take his father’s place.

Driving along the road to town, Vic could see the tree against which his father’s car had shattered. There was open ground between the road and the tree and it stood apart from the others, like a sentinel, a curator.

The funeral was one of the last times the church had been open and it overflowed with mourners. People stood outside the church doors and trailed down the stairs. Vic remembered people saying, “I’ve never seen anything like it.” Brian Enan gave the eulogy and described John as a “gifted athlete and a devoted husband and father.” He was “someone who cared more about others than he did himself and a person whose efforts and personal sacrifice had given the town a reputation as a rural sporting bastion with a community that was unbreakable.” Then he told the story of how John, at sixteen, had gone down to the city and spent the preseason with Collingwood. He would no doubt have been a superstar, but he met Glenda, chose love over sporting immortality, and that was the end of that. It was the truth, Vic knew, poorly coloured. There was no mention that Glenda had been part of an end-of-
season contest, during which the players put together a list of girls, ranking them according to their desirability, and competing to see who could get the best. It was a contest John had lost. He reminded Glenda of it sometimes when he had been drinking, but she never responded.

Vic didn’t speak at the funeral; Brian said that Vic was overcome with grief. The truth was that Vic didn’t know what he felt, but he knew it wasn’t grief.

He remembered sitting on the couch at home and hearing a distant noise like muffled thunder. It was John’s car breaking through the fence and hitting the only tree in the nearby paddock; but at the time he did not know what it was he had heard. Soon after, Brian Enan was knocking feverishly on the back door of the house, trying to remain composed.

It was a wet night on the verge of winter, a few weeks after Vic turned eighteen.

Vic called the police and walked with Brian to the tree. He had a stinging sensation in his legs but felt no sense of urgency or horror. At the site of the accident, there was a strong stench of beer and oil, contaminating the cold air that seeped in through his clothes and made his skin numb. Vic was later told that the steering wheel had broken John’s ribs and his jaw. Both his lungs had been punctured. Vic remembered a glimpse, in the dark of night, of his father’s face swollen and bloodied. Brian’s bag was on the floor, on the passenger side. He picked it up and waited on the shoulder of the road with Vic.

Tom Walsh, the last cop Henrithvale had before the police station was closed, had been at The Grower’s Association meeting with John and Brian a few hours earlier. He arrived and helped Brian clean up the beer cans that were scattered around the car. He also spoke to senior investigators. The coroner later found that fatigue had
been the cause of the accident. John had been working late, as was the norm, in his capacity as president of The Grower’s Association and had fallen asleep at the wheel while driving home. Alcohol wasn’t a factor; John had a few beers, but nothing excessive. He always drank responsibly. That’s why there wasn’t a skid mark, why there was no attempt to swerve and miss the tree in the paddock.

Afterwards, Vic remembered the relief, how he had felt like he had survived something, not only survived but triumphed. He gathered all of John’s things, his clothes, football trophies, anything he could get his hands on, and burned the lot of it. He took his time, sat in the cold and watched the orange glow; later he buried what the flames would not take away. He thought, then, that the house was his.

Vic pulled into the car park of the primary school twenty minutes early, but Brian had already arrived. He would be busy setting things up in the classroom at the rear of the building, moving tables into an oval shape, arranging chairs so that his back would be against the blackboard and his eyes would always have a clear view of the door. Vic sat in the darkness of the ute and felt the cold come in through the driver’s side window. Another car pulled into the car park, flooding the ute with its headlights. Vic got out and walked over to the school building. He wiped his feet on the mat and pushed the door open. The room was lit by weary fluorescent bulbs that hummed and hissed softly to each other.

“Do feel free, Victor, to come and help out if you arrive early. It might seem as if I am having the time of my life, but I assure you, I am not.” Brian was breathing
heavily from rearranging tables, his shirt was untucked and his tie had twisted. He grimaced as he crossed the floor as if carrying himself were burdensome.

“You alright, Brian?” Vic asked as he crossed over to Brian and helped fit the last table into place.

“I’ll say that I did more than I should have on Saturday, as I think you would be aware, and now I’ve come up sore.”

Before Vic could respond a tall, square-shouldered man stomped his feet on the mat outside and entered the room. He walked purposely towards Vic and Brian. His torso, long and wide seemed out of proportion to the rest of his body. He opened his mouth to speak, his teeth, yellowing and scattered, let out breath tarnished with cigarettes.

“Kenneth Moore, looking for Brian Enan.” Brian held out his hand and Kenneth shook it. Vic guessed they were around the same age.

“Good to put a face to a voice, Kenneth,” Brian said.

“Ken’ll do,” Ken said and looked at Vic.

“Well, Ken this is Vic Morrisson, one of the growers in the area.” Brian seemed nervous. Ken and Vic shook hands. “Ken has come across from Red River to talk about the experience they had with the requisition of irrigation leases.”

“Still farming in Red River?” Vic asked.

“Not anymore, no. If I was I wouldn’t be here.”

There was a silence as Vic considered how to continue.

“You’re John Morrisson’s son are you?” Ken demanded.

“Yeah.” Vic knew what was coming. It had happened regularly in the years after John’s death.
“Saw him play against Red River, must be more than twenty years ago, never forget it. Best bloody footballer I’ve ever seen. Better than those mugs on the TV.”

Vic smiled at Ken’s words as was expected.

Ken leaned back slightly for a moment as if to assess Vic. “Don’t take after him do ya?”

“No.”

“Too bloody bad for you.” Vic wondered how long Brian would tolerate the profanity.

“Ken, if you would like to come and get a coffee,” Brian intervened, “I can let you know what we should cover.”

Brian and Ken moved down a table near the door where Brian had set up tea, coffee, a packet of plain biscuits and some pamphlets on what membership in The Henrithvale Grower’s Association could offer. The meetings had been full in recent months. There were twelve farms in the area, but local proprietors were coming along as well. Brian wanted to create a sense that the community was pulling together, but Vic knew, like the rest of those who ran farms, that if the irrigation leases went, then so too did the workers and the industry that supported local business.

Vic walked outside, where the air was cold, and sat on a tree stump near the door. The only way out, he thought, the only way to keep the farm and satisfy Jane, would be a lottery win. He worked the numbers through in his head, thinking how much would be enough and all the things he would do.

Over the next half hour the small classroom filled, with close to thirty people showing up for the evening meeting. Dave was the last to arrive; it reminded Vic of their school days. Dave had June, his wife, with him. Vic met them at the door.

“You checkin’ tickets, are ya, Vic?”
“There’s a dress code, Dave, it’s a formal event,” Vic said, as he looked down at Dave’s ragged overalls.

“I promise not to take me dick out; is that formal enough?” Dave responded. June laughed; it was a loud odd sounding laugh that always made people look. Dave put his arm around her waist. “Not until I get home anyway, or maybe in the car on the way home, see how things go.” June rolled her eyes, but she enjoyed Dave’s disposition. She always laughed at his jokes, jokes she must have heard over and over again, and she always laughed with genuine delight.

“Now, excuse me, ladies and gents,” Brian called and people turned to face him. “Let’s, let’s get things under way. If we can all find a seat, we can get on with what we came here for.” Brian sat in the chair normally reserved for the teacher while everyone else shuffled into the student’s chairs. Vic thought they looked absurd in the undersized seats, but the meetings often felt absurd so he did not mind it.

“Right, shall we?” The air in the room was warm and dense but Brian preferred it that way and would never open a window. Brian began as he began every meeting by sending a roll around the room so that every person in attendance could record their name. It wasn’t needed; Brian did it for his own purposes. He had been challenged on it a few times that Vic could remember but his long and passionate defence overwhelmed opposition. He then set up his tape recorder in the middle of the room. He still used cassette tapes, as a way of keeping minutes. Later he would transcribe the recordings and “make them available to anyone who was in attendance or is a registered member of The Henrithvale Grower’s Association and was unable to attend.” Vic did not know of anyone in the more than twenty years that Brian had been working as president, who had taken up his offer.
“Now this evening we are very fortunate to have with us, Mr Kenneth, Ken, Moore the current president of The Red River Grower’s Association. Right, well, I’ve asked Ken to come along this evening to outline exactly what happened to the irrigation leases in Red River and what he learned from dealing with the people that we are now dealing with.”

The focus fell onto Ken, who was squashed onto a small chair next to Brian at the front of the room. He stood up and looked over the crowd before him as if waiting for a cue to begin.

“Put simply,” Ken said as he pulled at the sides of his loose fitting pants, “we lost the leases. Now some, those that read the writing on the wall, sold the whole kit and caboodle when they had the chance. Some tried to hang on and make a fist of it, but I tell you this for nothing, if you thought you were doin’ it tough now, try doin’ it without any bloody water.” He grimaced, as if in frustration with those in the room.

There was silence. Then the first question came from Rob Masterson, one of the few people in Henrithvale Vic would be glad to never see again.

“So what you’re sayin’, mate, is they just turn up and turn your pump off and that’s it?” Rob shook his head as if the whole thing was some rich hoax.

“Yes, not without warning, but yes. Now that warning was different for different people, but there came a day when that was it. Some worked on a reduction over eighteen months and some signed the paperwork and off it went.”

“Why?” Rob’s voice was sharp.

“How the bloody hell should I know? If I could answer that I wouldn’t be standin’ here.” Ken shot back and Brian squirmed.
“Were you aware, Ken,” Brian interjected, “or in your opinion, was there a… a coercion to have people sign on the dotted line?” Vic could tell Brian had rehearsed the question. He spoke too slowly, too deliberately.

“I wouldn’t call it coercion, no. I’d call it a financial incentive.” Ken smirked. “Some of the growers, no doubt like some of you here, had contracts and crop they couldn’t turn their back on at a moment’s notice. They tended to be the ones that were weaned.”

“How many stayed on?” Dave called out, and Ken scanned the crowd until he could put a face to the question.

“We had twenty-six farms in the area that sourced water from Red River. Twenty-two sold, which left four. Inside eighteen months they were all finished.”

Ken’s answer sent a ripple through the group. Brian looked as if he wanted to seize control of events; he no doubt had questions to ask, questions that would give people a sense of hope.

“What about local business?” Etta Place, proprietor of the Royal Mail, stood up from her seat. A tall voluptuous woman, she had arrived in Henrithvale in her early twenties, purchased the Royal Mail and been its sole proprietor for nearly fifty years. She was the only person Vic could remember who was openly not impressed by John. Sometimes she would call Glenda and let her know when John was on his way home, but for the most part she kept herself at a distance. Vic had wanted, still wanted, to thank her for her phone calls. He only drank socially, just a beer or two but Etta treated him like a stranger. Jane told him there were photos of Etta on the wall of a back room at the Royal Mail that were taken in South America.

Brian interrupted:
“Before we get to these types of questions we need to establish a sense of order. We might well be in a classroom, but…”

“Brian, I didn’t ask you!” Etta scolded him, and Vic smiled.

Ken looked at Brian, then back at Etta.

“What do you think happened?” Ken asked. “The pub survived but not much else. It wasn’t overnight, but one by one they went. Rural town, no industry, nothing but passing trade. That won’t work.”

“Any government money for that?” Etta asked.

“Not one cent.” Ken looked about the room. There was an uneasiness settling in. Vic looked at Dave, but Dave was leaning to hear something that June had whispered to him.

“Now if we are going to avoid this sort of thing, we need to make sure we all stick together…” Brian said.

“Together?” Ken scoffed. “We had the same bloody idea, but they offer this bloke a little more than that bloke, what do you think happens? A bit more money for the first few that sign on, they’ll take it.”

“This is Henrithvale.” Brian was angry now and he stood up. “There is enough pressure on government to put an end to this. Now those of you that had a read of the article in The Melbourne Advertiser will be aware that this isn’t a cut and dry issue any more.” Brian leaned forward on the table, dark sweat stains emerging from under his arms. The windows in the classroom had fogged over. Brian pounded his open hand down onto the table in front of him. “Red River was the first town in a long line; it’s something we can draw on. It’s an election year, so we need to make this an election issue.”
There was already too much for people in the room to talk about, and Brian could not contain them. Ken’s voice broke through the clamour. Brian sat down.

“I will say this: there were plenty of blokes about working to make sure deals got done.”

“What does that mean?” Rob asked.

“What do you reckon it means?” Ken’s hands shifted so they rested lightly on his hips. “It means there were blokes who came out and did all they could do to get a signature. Brian’s right on the money when he says it’s one in all in. Once the first one goes that’s it.”

Vic could sense the division in the room. If he or any of the others decided to sell, then they sold the town as well.

Ken looked to Brian.

“Best of luck to you.”

Brian, Vic saw, was stunned. He shifted papers around his desk, as spot-fire conversations ignited and flourished in different parts of the room.

Dave let out a sigh and stood up.

“Let’s have a break, folks; give it ten minutes,” he said, addressing the group.

The conversations continued but people began heading towards the tea and biscuits.

Dave sat down next to Vic. “Fuck me dead, what was goin’ through Brian’s head?”

Vic shrugged. He was glad that Jane had stayed at home. Dave nudged Vic with his elbow.

“Better keep June outta trouble,” he said and made his way to the tea and biscuits.
In a few minutes Brian called people back to order and stood at the front of the room.

“Look, I think I should explain something here. I asked Ken to come along tonight so we could see where Red River went wrong. Now that is a bit unsavoury I know, and I apologise if some of you felt put out by it.” People were listening but Vic could see how vulnerable everybody looked, it was in their eyes, in their posture and the way their hands fidgeted. “Henrithvale and Red River are not the same, not by a long shot.”

“Brian, what do ya actually know?” It was Rob again. “Tell me somethin’ useful will ya?”

“This is what I know, Robert: that in an election year, of all years, under significant pressure, from opposition and the wider public, a sitting government will not, will not,” he pushed the words at Rob as he brushed his thinning hair away from his forehead, “move on a contentious issue. Now if we…”

“You a politician now, Brian? You’re talkin’ outta ya arse. This is bullshit!” He stood up, his eyes were fixed on Brian and he pushed up the sleeves of his shirt to the elbow on both arms.

“Shut up and listen, will ya,” Dave interjected. He and Rob had never found common ground.

“Are you his keeper, Foster?”

“Now listen to me, both of you.” Brian spoke firmly. The room was quiet and stuffy; Vic could see the condensation sliding down the dark windows to his left and right. “We will have civility in these meetings as long as I am Chair. I might be the wrong side of seventy but have no fear that I will put you out if this continues.” Brian waited for a response but none came. Then he leant forward and continued. “Right,
know this, Robert and David in particular, if we stick together, one behind the other then we can make it all too hard for the requisition of water leases or anything else. That is what we all need to do.”

Vic, reluctantly, put up his hand and Brian nodded at him.

“You reckon if we wait long enough they’ll just go away, it won’t be worth the trouble?” It gave Brian the focus Vic knew he needed.

“Simply put, Vic, but yes. It’s not always the best approach but it’s the best approach right now for Henrithvale. We’ve got to make it too hard for them.” Vic could sense the disquiet in the squeaking of chairs. Brian let the silence settle in the room.

“Before we get into administrative matters I am going to offer a caution. I have spoken to Ken on the telephone at length during the past week and I want to touch on something he mentioned here tonight. There will be people in the area who will want you to sell and they will no doubt sweeten the pot. Well, I won’t say anything more, only there is a right way and a wrong way to deal with these people.”

Brian waited again but nobody spoke. Vic kept his eyes on the burgundy carpet that had been dirtied by his boots.

The meeting drifted on and moved through administrative matters and fee arrears. When Brian closed the meeting, Vic helped him stack the chairs and move the tables back into position for the morning classes. Maybe Mulholland had been to other farms, Vic thought; maybe he was trying to widen the divide.

“It was nice to see June come along this evening,” Brian said, as he packed the refreshments into a box and Vic unplugged the kettle. “It sends the right message about an appropriate response not only from a grower but from those around him.”

He knows, Vic thought.
“You know, Vic, I remember your mother. She was, let me add, a woman that I had the utmost respect for. I remember her support for John in his capacity as captain of the football club and president of The Grower’s Association.”

Brian took off his glasses and rubbed at his eyes. Then he picked up his things

“We need a few more types like that around.”

Brian, Vic thought, didn’t know anything about his mother. Vic remembered his mother getting pale and going into hospital, coming home, going back to hospital. Mostly he remembered the urgency he felt for it to be over, for her to be well. No one said anything about dying. Even in the last few days, when she was confined to bed, and a regional nurse stopped by twice per day, Vic had believed that she would be alright.

He was on his way home from school, riding an old bike on the rough edges of the road, when Constable Tom Walsh had stopped him to tell him that his mother had died.

“I went to the school, Vic, but you’d already left. People are looking for you.”

Tom reached out a hand and took a firm grip of Vic’s shoulder. He went on talking but all Vic heard was an echoing wind. He had lost something unnameable, something he knew was intrinsic to who he was, something that could not be recovered.

Tom, standing next to Vic on the roadside, put his other hand on Vic’s other shoulder, and said something about his own mother. Then he put Vic’s bike in the boot and drove Vic home. There were a dozen cars parked outside the house. Vic opened the door of the cop car and started running. He ran for the railway cutting, panicked and wild. Finding the tracks, he fell to the ground and vomited, crying in a way that he couldn’t stop, couldn’t contain. It was like a fevered sickness.
It was Dave Foster who found him. Dave sat next to Vic and cried too, and then he put his arms around Vic, letting Vic rest his head on his shoulder. It wasn’t the first time. When John had an episode, when he pushed Vic out of the house, when he turned on Glenda, this is where Vic would come. In those younger years Dave would put his arms around Vic, hugging him like his own mother.

Then there was that guileless moment, with their faces close, their mouths pressed together. Their fingers locked and held. Neither he nor Dave had acted; it was the moment that had brought things about. It was also the end of the closeness they had shared and the start of something uncomfortable but also more certain, more predictable.

Vic remembered how, when he got back to the house, Brian Enan caught him before he came in the door and pulled him out to the carport by the back of his shirt.

“Something you need to understand here,” he said, pushing Vic up against his father’s ute. “You’ve lost a mother, but that man in there, your father, he has lost a wife. And you’ve gone off to blazes. Get in there and give the man some support.”

Vic finished stacking the chairs and mumbled something to Brian about needing to get home. He hurried outside to the ute, remembering his mother’s funeral. He recalled the dank smell of stale air in the church and the richness of fresh cut flowers. People were there, Vic knew, for John. Dave sat near Vic in the church, but they didn’t make eye contact. Herbert and Edna spoke to him at the wake, told him she was a much better woman than John deserved, told him that if he needed anything he just needed to stop by the store.

As he drove home, Vic thought about his mother buried in the cemetery, next to John, with a view by day, of curved yellowing hills and, by night, of sky punctured by a million stars. The farm, he thought, was her place too.
The windows in the kitchen were dirty, the view outside obscured by a thin layer of dust hardened onto the glass by the heat of summer and the cold of winter. Still, Vic saw the smoke drifting across the sky. It was subtle, blending into the deep grey of the clouds, but he recognised it straight away.

He had woken up early, long before Jane and the girls, and had been eating breakfast, trying to figure out what kind of day it would be, and there it was, the smoke from the station house. He put down his coffee, there was no time to finish it, left a half-eaten piece of toast on the plate and pulled on his coat as he left the house. He drove the ute to the far end of the orchard and then made his way on foot quickly over the top paddock to the railway cutting.

In the cutting ferns were being overrun by serrated tussock, faded yellow by the winter. As he walked Vic found that his breathing was troubled, as if there was something wrong with the air. His mouth was filling with saliva but his lips were too numb to spit. Coldness crawled under his clothes and over his skin as he paused at the edge of the cutting, just before it dipped and straightened out to the station house. Slender thistles, those that had flowered last season and those on the verge of flowering, gathered in bands and their barbed seeds grasped at his legs as he waded through them.
He could feel a tremor, working through his hands then up and over his shoulders and down his back. There was a feeling in his legs like he had wet himself, but he folded his arms and kept going.

The station house came into view. He stepped out of the cutting and into a biting wind that made the tip of his nose and lips sore. He put his shoulder to the wind and kept moving, as tears clouded his view.

There was something different, something he hadn’t seen before. The thin desperado was sitting outside the station house, on a chair on the platform, the chair tilted back on two legs. He held a rifle across his knees, cradled gently in his hands. He hadn’t seemed to notice Vic, and made no movement at all until Vic was near the top of the stairs that led onto the platform. Then the thin desperado shifted his weight so the chair settled back on its four legs. With his left hand he combed down his moustache. Vic waited.

“I seen you comin’ in.” The desperado spoke in a plain voice without looking at Vic. “Thought about sendin’ one your way,” he tapped the rifle with his right hand, “keep you on your toes.” Vic sat down on the platform next to the desperado, the rough red bricks of the station house pressed against his coat. “I’d invite you to take a chair, but the old boy in there,” he gestured to the station house with a flick of his head, “he ain’t in the mood, best not to trouble him.”

Vic and the desperado looked out at the vast hills of yellowing grass that scented the air with the ghost of summer warmth. They were surrounded by open fields and nothing, no one, to tell them what to do. They sat this way for a long time and the only thing Vic heard was the heave and sigh of the breeze. He had almost fallen asleep when he felt the desperado looking down at him.
“You done somethin’ ‘bout that ranch of yours yet?” His left hand slowly cocked the rifle, and he fixed his eyes somewhere on the horizon. He let the rifle sit cocked across his lap and Vic longed to reach out and take it for his own.

“There’s nothin’ to be done.” Sometimes Vic felt himself drawn into the desperado’s voice, felt his own words sounding as if they were shaped by the desperado’s mouth. “I reckon I’ll sell.”

“An’ just like that too? Well, so be it.” The desperado stood up and walked to the edge of the platform. He seemed to spot something in the distance, and his stance became rigid. He took up the rifle, pushed the hilt into his shoulder and leaned his head to one side so that he could see straight down the barrel. His finger rested lightly on the trigger. Then, just as suddenly he turned and stood over Vic.

“You reach your decision damn quicker ‘an most would.”

“Jane doesn’t want to stay, and without irrigation I can’t grow a damn thing.” Vic felt as if the desperado might turn and strike him with the rifle so he remained completely still.

“Well it’s all jus’ settled then, ain’t it?” The desperado walked back to his seat, uncocking the rifle. The rifle again rested on the desperado’s lap, the barrel pointed away from him. The desperado tapped his fingers quickly on the butt of the rifle. “I hear you sayin’ it, but I don’t see nothin’ to the doin’. Sayin’ it is somethin’, but doin’ it is somethin’ else all different.”

Vic didn’t know what to say. There was a letter at home, which gave him the option on settlement, anywhere from thirty to ninety days, or by negotiation if needed. All he had to do was sign. No need for lawyers or conveyance; that would all be taken care of. It would be easy.
“Yeah well, there you go,” Vic stood up. His back ached and he rubbed at it with his hands.

“Here it is as I see it.” The desperado relaxed back into his chair. “I knew a man took a fox cub, tried ta raise it up like a dog, kept it tied ta his house. After a time it stopped eatin’, starved itself. Man said it was nothin’ but a dumb animal. That fox jus’ knew what livin’ was and what it ain’t.” The desperado took in a deep breath, so his nostrils flared, then closed his eyes.

Vic knew that it was time to leave, just as he had always known when it was time to come here. He crept to the edge of the platform, taking the stairs carefully, but once he felt the ground underfoot he started to run. The vast hills of yellowing grass were gone and the ground was rough. Thistles scratched his hands but he kept running, only stopping once he was inside the cutting.

He remembered how he had told Dave about the station house when they were boys. When they were down at the railway cutting, he invited Dave to see it, but Dave awkwardly declined. The next time Vic saw the smoke and heeded the call, the thin desperado met him at the door, snarling: “It ain’t no event for one an’ all.” Then he slammed the door shut and Vic didn’t see him again for months.

Vic could hear the wind as he climbed out of the cutting, his flared nostril drawing in air and the slippery ground causing him to stumble as he tried to gain his footing. He wiped his muddy hands on his pants. Slowly, he walked over the undulating, windswept land. Sullen winter clouds bullied their way through the valley making the morning seem like evening.
Vic ate the rest of his toast and stared down into the cold cup of coffee. He heard Jane stir, heard her footsteps on the wooden floor. She hesitated a moment before she came into the kitchen.

“Morning, Vic, how was the meeting?” She crossed to the bench and turned on the kettle.

“Rob got a bit fired up.” Vic watched her heap spoonfuls of instant coffee into her cup. He wondered if she cared or if she was just looking for another fracture.

“What about?” She sat down at the kitchen table directly across from him.

“Kenneth, Ken Moore. He was the president of The Red River Grower’s Association. I guess he still is.” Vic tasted the cold coffee.

“Most of the farms in Red River took the government deal and those that didn’t ended up in the shit,” he spat the words at her. There was a sharpness to his tone that surprised him. He pushed his palms flat against the table. She stared at him. He had never said an angry word to her, never raised his voice to anyone, but now he recognised a faint echo in his words that trailed off into the past. Jane got up and left the table.

Vic pushed aside the cold coffee and thought of his father. There had been a time when Vic was younger, maybe eight or nine, when John would take him to footy training, sometimes to The Grower’s Association meetings. It was an initiation most boys in the area went through, and it provided the beginning of what became lifelong routines. For Vic, it had lasted about eight months.

There was something in Vic that John didn’t like. There was something he wanted to fix and, in the end, when he couldn’t fix it, he kept away from Vic.

Vic knew when it had started, when John had first recognised it. They were at football training for the under-tens on a Tuesday after school and John had come
down early to talk with the other fathers. There was a practice match going on and try as he would Vic struggled to find the ball, struggled to do the things as the other kids did them. After training he ran over to John and the other fathers that were gathered near the edge of the stand.

Someone said,

“Vic, get your old man to show you how to kick.”

There was laughter but John didn’t like it. Vic knew right away. For the next few months John would kick the old football with him most nights after school on the rough lawn behind the house. John told him he needed to get his head over the ball and kick through the ball. There was reserved praise when Vic did something John approved of and irritated mumbles when he did not. Vic had the sense then, still did at times, that if he could please John, be someone John wanted him to be, then maybe the world would change.

Some nights when John was late Vic would wait for him out on the lawn, kicking the ball to himself. He would kick the football in the air, catch it and run off, doing the same thing over and over again. While he did this he would call out what was happening, commentating on some game that was taking place inside his head. It was a game in which he was the star and there was a Grand Final to be won, and he was the player to kick the winning goal. When he got home, John would tell him to cut it out, but Vic couldn’t help it. The last time it happened Vic felt John’s rough hand jerk him backwards and out of the final moments of another game he was about to win for Henrithvale.

“Enough of this shit.”

With his other hand John snatched the football out of Vic’s arms. “You can have this back when ya know what it’s for.” Then John and the football were gone.
After that John went to footy training alone and told Vic he had to stay home when
The Grower’s Association meetings were on. They were school nights after all.

Vic cried as he always did and stood there uncertain of what to do.

His mother had been watching through the kitchen window, but waited for him to come inside before she said anything.

“It’s alright mate he doesn’t mean it.” Her voice always calmed him. She knelt down and hugged him, the smell of onions on her clothes. A week later there was a new second-hand football waiting for Vic when he came home from school. His mother told him to keep it under his bed.

Sarah and Emily came into the kitchen, dressed for school. Jane followed, ushering the girls along as if there was not time for him.

“I’m taking the girls to school, then I’m meeting mum half-way.” Half-way was between Henrithvale and Bendigo. They would both drive the ninety or so minutes to a half-way point, meeting at a truck stop next to a McDonald’s.

“I can take the girls,” Vic offered. His voice was quiet.

“No, it’s on the way. I’ll pick them up on my way home.” She told the girls to get in the car or they would be late.

“Have a good day, girls.” They rushed over to where he was seated at the table, their eyes brightening to the sound of his voice. He wanted to impart some lesson or advice that would make them happy and safe; he reached out his hands to them. “Remember, if you get everything right, ya might not have to go back.”

They laughed as they always did. He stood up and kissed them both on the forehead and then tried to kiss Jane, but she pulled away and guided the girls out the back door.
Vic spent the morning and early afternoon tending to the orchard but it was slow going. He couldn’t prune with the type of gloves that kept his hands warm so he had to endure the cold. To make matters worse, it was raining again. The trees were bare, nothing but bony limbs reaching to the sky for alms, like a tribe of vagabonds. Yet at the centre of the orchard there were twelve orphic trees, Black Twigs his grandfather called them, each more than a century old, they were remnants of a past orchard. These trees never seemed to be without large, dark red fruit. Vic had tried and failed many times to grow something from their seeds. Even John had left them alone. Their constant abundance seemed to admonish the rest of the orchard.

The Black Twigs were in a rough circle and the centre of this circle was thought to be the place where Vic’s great-great uncle Warren was buried, although there was a gravestone for him in the old section of the Henrithvale cemetery. Vic’s grandfather had told Vic that Warren had been buried in the centre of the orchard after he drowned in the flooded Red River. Warren had loved the orchard so much they had buried him there and put the empty coffin in the cemetery to appease the church. Vic remembered his grandfather at rest in the grove, calling himself Lazy Lawrence. Sometimes Vic found himself in earnest conversation with these trees about his mother, Jane and his daughters. But he had not mentioned the requisition of the irrigation leases and he wondered if they knew, if they understood.
In the late afternoon the rain became sleet, so Vic took the ute into town to see Herbert and Edna. The general store was closed again, but still not locked. Inside there was a sign on the counter and an empty ice-cream container so that people could pay for their purchases. The room was stale, as if no one had been in there for years. Vic made his way behind the counter and opened the door that led into Herbert and Edna’s house. He stood and listened, then heard the soft murmurings of radio and found the smell of rosemary.

“Jack, you there?” He started down the hall and Herbert came out of the kitchen to meet him, his face obscured by shadow.

“Here he is, the next Henrithvale premiership winner!” The enthusiasm was unmistakable.

Vic smiled.

“Thought I’d drop in, see how things are.”

Herbert waved Vic into the kitchen and pointed to a seat. He turned his back on Vic and went about making a sandwich. It seemed to Vic that nothing much had changed here in all the time he had known Herbert and Edna, although the strong growth of the rhododendron bush outside the kitchen window shaped light in the room differently.

Herbert put the sandwich aside and rested the palms of his hands against the edge of the bench. He seemed about to speak, and then stopped. His head started to droop and he began sobbing. Vic moved towards him quickly as if he might embrace him, but stopped himself an arm’s length away. He put a hand on Herbert’s shoulder and squeezed so that he felt the sharpness of his collarbone. Herbert waited a few moments and then steadied himself. He reached up and patted Vic’s hand so that Vic took it away.
“Bloody hard this thing is, Vic.” He turned and rubbed at the edges of his eyes. “Girls are coming up to help out.” Herbert and Edna’s daughters were fifteen years older than Vic; they had moved away as soon as they had finished high school, visiting irregularly.

“I’m sorry, Jack.” Vic couldn’t say more. He still wasn’t convinced that Edna would die, but then, he thought, he had never believed that his mother would either.

“The girls want to move us down to the city. A care place that deals with this sort of thing.” Herbert shook his head. “She says she doesn’t need it, but I reckon we’ll go, just for a bit.”

“I’ll keep an eye on things for ya.” Vic said. “I’ll try not to steal too much.” He grinned hoping it would lift Herbert’s mood.

Herbert nodded his appreciation, turned towards the bench and flicked the kettle on. Vic took two cups out of a corner cupboard, and Herbert placed a tea bag in each one.

“Got some biscuits here somewhere,” Herbert said as he opened cupboards and draws.

“Next to the sink, on your right,” Vic remembered. Herbert opened the cupboard and there they were.

“You’ll have to move in, Vic.” Edna’s raspy voice surprised him from the doorway that led into the kitchen. Herbert looked panicked and rushed over to support her.

“It’s alright, Jack, I’m not an invalid just yet.” Nevertheless she let Herbert help her to a seat, and Vic made an extra cup of tea. The three of them sat around the table.

“Girls coming up, Jack was saying.”
“So they say, but I’ve heard that before.” Edna sipped at her tea, the cup a great weight for her shaking hands.

“How was the meeting?” Herbert asked after a long silence.

“Aw, yes, those bloody meetings,” Edna intervened, “and that tape recorder,” she shook her head.

“Yeah, was alright. Nothin’s changed.”

“Well, there you are. Don’t sit around waiting anymore, Vic.” Edna lifted her head and Vic saw how emaciated her face had become, and that her eyes had yellowed.

“Jane’s a lovely girl, Vic, but she’s not the sort to stay here, not with what’s happening.” Vic looked at the cup of tea in his hands, turning it around and drawing out its warmth.

“Grand Final on Saturday. Brian must be beside himself,” Herbert said before Edna could say anymore.

“Played it pretty close to his chest so far,” Vic said, keeping his eyes on the heat rising from the cup.

Edna watched them, then put her cup down.

“You can talk football all you like, but something will happen whether you want it to or not.” There was a rattle in her lungs when she spoke

“I’m just waitin’ on a few things, Ed. Isn’t much to say.”

“Not to me there isn’t, you say it to her…” Edna’s voice trailed to a whisper and then to a cough: a broken sound that came from her lungs. Herbert braced her.

Vic knew it was time to leave. He stood and put his right hand lightly on Edna’s shoulder as the coughing fit subsided and looked at Herbert.
He remembered those days after his mother had passed away. He remembered seeing his reflection in a mirror and thinking how strange he looked, how distant. That was how Herbert looked now. Vic had no words for him. He put his cup in the sink and made his way back to the ute. He sat there a minute, absorbing the cold air that had leaked into the cabin, feeling like he needed to wash something off his skin. Then he headed back towards the farm.

It had taken more than a decade after John’s death for Vic to reclaim the orchard from John’s failures and foolishness. In all that time there was never a profit, but each season accumulated a little less debt than the season before. There was no time for complacency, and every season seemed to bring a codling moth plague no matter how much work he did to remove their over-wintering sites. He had spent the last autumn banking earth against the trees, just him and a shovel. He had stunk of the eucalyptus balm Jane rubbed into his lower back every night so that the smell would forever remind him of blistered palms and mud-heavy boots— and Jane’s hands.

Maybe, without him, a few trees would hold on, but in time everything would go to ruin. Perhaps, fifty or sixty years from now, Sarah or Emily would take their grandchildren out this way, if the river hadn’t been dammed. With vague and failing memories, they would point to where they thought the house had been and where the trees might have been. But they would know nothing of his mother— only of John, who they would find celebrated in a hundred newspaper clippings that spoke of his achievements on the football field and with the Grower’s Association. Vic could not deny these achievements and that they gave life to the community, but they were undeserved. Perhaps the girls would visit the cemetery, but they would never know
the truth of it. John and his mother would only ever be images in a few sun-worn photographs.

The rain was gone and there was barely any light left in the day but Vic wandered among the trees. Then he thought he heard someone whistling, but he couldn’t tell from which direction it was coming. The wind picked up the noise and turned it over. Vic took a few steps further into the orchard and squatted down so the branches didn’t obscure his view. Down low the coldness of the day found its way in through his clothes. He couldn’t see anything, so he moved deeper in amongst the trees, squatting down occasionally to try and see something from beneath the branches. The furrows he had ploughed in the autumn made the ground between the trees soft. The wind suddenly quietened and there was nothing. He heard the shrill call of cockatoos and then silence.

He stood up and heard the whistling again, louder, closer. It was behind him. He turned around to catch the blur of someone moving amongst the Black Twigs, not thirty metres away.

He took off his shoes and socks and ran, barefoot, ducking under some branches and found William Mulholland.

Mulholland didn’t seem to see Vic until he was right in front of him. Then he stopped whistling.

“Ah, Vic, you’ve given me a start,” he said with a smile as he put his left hand gently to his chest. “I came to speak with you but…”

“This is private property, mate. Ya can’t just…” Vic could hear the wind circling around the trees.

“Oh certainly it is, Vic, and I meant no offence. I stopped by the house but there was no one to be found.” Mulholland’s eyes were a swirling grey. “I caught the
faintest smell of apples on the breeze and just followed my nose.” He smiled at Vic, reaching up to admire an apple that hung from a Black Twig branch just above his head. “It must be marvellous to grow such beautiful things; to work with your own hands to nurture something so delicate.” He waited a moment. “I’ve great admiration for you, Vic.”

“What do ya want?” Vic felt the mud, like cold boneless fingers, work its way between his toes.

“Want? Oh, only to talk. To be honest with you I don’t mind it that folk in Henrithvale are reluctant to sell. It’s a beautiful place.” He smiled and stared at the apple, took a firm grip. “Do you mind? Can you spare one?”

“S’pose.” Vic folded his arms.

Mulholland plucked the apple from the tree and pushed it up under his nose. He took in a deep breath, closed his eyes and put the apple in his pocket.

“You know, when I was young an apple was a rare thing, a real treat. An orchard like this would have been heaven to me as a child. Now I know why you’re so reluctant to sell.” He smiled and seemed to want Vic to speak, but Vic had nothing to say. “Your girls, let me think, Emily and Sarah is it?”

“Yeah, that’s it.” Vic took a slight step backwards so the arms of the old apple trees rested on his shoulders.

“They must adore this place.” Vic would have been glad if they had shown even a little interest. They were young, but he knew they would not be farmers. Maybe if there had been a son, but he was glad there hadn’t been and wouldn’t be.

“What are ya sellin,’ Mr. Mulholland?” Vic folded his arms across his chest.

“Selling? Oh, I’m not selling anything, Vic. I’m buying is what I’m doing.” He walked closer to Vic, pulled the apple out of his pocket and rubbed it gently
against the lapel of his grey suit. The wind pushed in through the trees and Vic could feel the numbing coldness in his feet. “What do you say, Vic, it’s time we had a chat?”

“I don’t know who the bloody hell you think you are, but I suggest…” There was something about William Mulholland, a shadowy scent that told Vic to be wary. Mulholland put the apple back in his pocket.

“It’s a difficult time for you, Vic.” Mulholland interrupted, “Believe me, I know what you are going through, but stubbornness in the face of calamity has no reward. I took that from my mother and I share…”

“I’m not lookin’ to sell and I reckon you’ve had your say.” Vic reminded himself of Brian, but he was feeling frightened. The furrows on Mulholland’s brow deepened and his eyes spoke of malevolence.

“Okay, Vic, okay. No harm done. I’ll see myself away.” He turned, the wind catching momentarily inside his jacket and shifting the collars of his shirt. He adjusted them to his satisfaction, took half a step and then turned back to Vic.

“There was just one pressing matter Vic, do you mind?” He sounded concerned, sincere, and Vic relented. “I’ve been doing this a long time.” He paused and his eyes abated, then his voice became earnest and compassionate. “Each time, when pressed, people will say they are connected to their home, to all those generations that have come before. Is that what you think, Vic?”

“S’pose you could call it that.” Vic wanted to shake his head, tell Mulholland it wasn’t true, but there was something beguiling in the sound of his voice.

“Sentimental are you, Vic?” Vic’s arms tightened and although he did not speak, he knew he had given himself away. “Sentimentality binds you to the past, but it also keeps you just where you are.” Vic felt as if he were being dissected.
“Sentimentality is like religion and it demands a spiritual sufferance. It comes from frightened people. It’s anxiety. That’s all God is: anxiety.” Mulholland’s grey eyes had a watery lustre. He smiled as if remembering something and his face, his voice, became smooth and gentle.

“Those things, Vic, they’re not real.” His voice softened to a whisper that had the same tone as the wind. He stepped forward and put his right hand on Vic’s shoulder. “Don’t be frightened, Vic. Sell your farm, take the money and go live somewhere else.”

The wind continued to circle around them and Vic could feel the branches from the Black Twigs pressing into his back.

“Just think about it,” Mulholland said, removing his hand from Vic’s shoulder. Then he turned and wandered back into the orchard, heading towards the house.

Vic, his feet pressed into the mud, did not feel he could follow him.
Vic parked the ute next to the stand. He watched Brian place witches hats out on the oval and then place a few footballs next to each one. Lights from several tall poles spaced around the ground’s perimeter illuminated the centre of the ground, but the edges were still dark. He could see the swarms of insects drawn into the lights, as if they offered some greater meaning to life. Dave called them “glorified street lights” but it was better than nothing. Vic let his thoughts focus on the game to come. In just a few days he would play in a game that he had wanted to play in all his life.

Vic did not believe God was real, at least not in the way he was told in church. Mulholland had been wrong there. But he did believe in warnings and premonitions. If in the midst of such calamitous events Henrithvale could win a premiership, if he could win a premiership, then perhaps anything was possible.

Vic took his football bag from behind the seat and made his way towards the clubrooms. In the clubrooms he found himself alone with the picture of John high on the wall. There were other photos, of premiership teams, of the oval before the stand was erected, but the photo of John was the largest. John was in his mid-twenties with a mess of black hair that reached down to his shoulders. Underneath the photo was a plaque added years later, no doubt Brian’s work.

Vic started to get changed and remembered how Brian had asked many years ago if Vic would donate John’s trophies and awards to the football club, so that they could be put on permanent display. Vic had told him he didn’t know where they were.
In the fire the plastic on the trophies had melted and bubbled giving the flames a green tinge. Brian hobbled into the rooms as Vic was lacing his boots.

“I need not remind you, do I, Vic, that I am not a man of your age and dexterity.” Brian’s face had a reddish hue and sweat gleamed on his forehead and cheeks.

“Uh, no. I…”

“No is right. So, might I prevail upon you to provide some assistance?”

“Sorry, Brian, thought you were finished.”

“Thought has nothing to do with it. Thought and Asked live at opposite ends of the street, and I can tell you this for nothing, Asked gets a lot more done than Thought.” With that Brian left the clubrooms.

Vic followed. Out in the night, in shorts and a worn University Blues guernsey, he felt the coldness tighten around his legs. He picked up a football from a basket outside the clubrooms and caressed the hardness in its skin. Then he walked onto the grass and began running laps, bouncing the ball as he went. He focussed on his breathing, making sure that he bounced the ball only when he exhaled. In the quietness, the stand seemed like a ruined mausoleum from some long gone civilisation. He ran slowly, caught occasionally in the headlights from other cars, as they wound their way down to the ground and parked near the ute.

Vic was fifteen when he realised that there were others, like Dave, who were better than him. A little while later he realised that they had always been better than him, but he did not see it earlier because he did not want to see it. Then the idea of it, of him, Victor Morrisson, being a professional footballer became foolish. He would never please John. There was bleakness in that realisation, but he couldn’t make it any different. It changed the way he played. It meant he stayed away from the ball during
games, suddenly aware of those inadequacies that had frustrated John, but the thought of stopping, of giving it away, never came. Instead there was an urgency to be here, to always come back, with every season offering the hope of some sort of redemption. As he jogged his fifth lap Dave Foster ran out to join him.

“You done three laps, Vic?”

“Five,” he said, as he exhaled and took in air quickly, expelling the uncertainty that troubled his thoughts.

“Brian says you only need to run three. I’ll take two of yours and do one of me own.”

They ran together around the perimeter of the oval, silently handballing the football back and forth until they neared the goals. Suddenly, Dave tucked the ball under his arm and sprinted away, taking a single bounce and then drilling the goal from forty-five metres out. He turned and did a victory celebration.

Dave was one of those people who never needed to do very much to stay fit; he just always seemed ready to run, to fight for the ball, to be able to kick long. Vic slowed as he approached Dave and with a flick of his head told Dave to turn around. Brian Enan was watching from the centre of the ground, clipboard in hand, scowling his disapproval. Dave went to collect the ball he had kicked and Vic joined the playing group near the race that led to the clubrooms; their warm breath and warm bodies pushed away the cold.

“It will be a short run tonight, some end-to-end kicking, break down into forwards, backs and mids, and work on structures.” Brian was wearing his light blue tracksuit pants with dark blue trimming. He had a whistle around his neck, which he blew on to indicate when an exercise started and finished. He stood in the middle of the oval and watched as the players broke into five groups. They started with one ball
kicked clockwise from group to group. On the second rotation another ball was introduced until eight balls were in play. There was no time to think, just to move and react, although it was familiar and predictable. Vic always played better when he didn’t have time to think about what it was he needed to do.

“Trust the voice of your team mates,” Brian yelled. Vic could feel a pained energy in his arms and legs. As he caught and then kicked another ball, he felt himself being drawn away from the complications and impossibilities beyond the game. A thought began to crystallise: that the past could be changed, reclaimed, with a premiership. The forlorn years behind him, he thought, would not be so desolate if they led him to where he had so longed to be.

As the training session came to a close Brian had the group run a lap, with everyone pressed in close.

“Closer than that!” Brian yelled. “These are your team mates, know how they run, know how they move, know how they breathe, know how they think.” The group moved in and Vic felt himself become part of the movement of bodies through night air, their laboured breathing keeping joint time.

“Close the eyes!” Brian demanded, “bring up the pace.” They ran faster. Vic didn’t know who was around him, but it didn’t matter. He was part of the whole, moving forward in a trance. He imagined them transformed into some mythical beast, each man a tendon, a muscle or a bone working in unison.

In the clubrooms Vic sat on the bench enjoying the clutter of conversations and movement as players began to change. The smell of damp sweat seeped out of the
showers with steam from the hot water. Brian stood in the doorway watching, as if looking for something, then nodded, as if to himself.

“No one is to leave just yet; there are matters, urgent matters may I add, that need to be discussed.” Vic and the others gave Brian their full attention. “Collect yourselves as you are able and be ready in fifteen minutes.” Brian walked out of the clubrooms.

“What d’ya reckon?” Dave asked Vic, as he pulled on his pants. “The old Clock might wanna put the jumper on again.” Vic smiled and shook his head.

When Brian reappeared he had changed back into the blue shirt with the short sleeves; his arms had a red tinge and were washed with goose bumps. He never changed in the clubrooms. Dave joked that there was a telephone box he used.

In his hand, which had a slight shake to it, Brian held a letter.

“As you know, or as you should know, the Henrithvale Football Club is part of the Western Football League, the governing body of which is The Greater Western Districts Football Association.” He looked around the room. Vic could not recall being surrounded by such silence and he had no thought as to what might being coming. “In my capacity as President of the Henrithvale Football Club, I received this letter.” He held the letter high above his head, his trembling hand giving the impression that he was shaking it in angry defiance. “I will read this letter to you now.”

Brian took the letter in both hands and held it a short distance away from his face. He cleared his throat and hesitated. He nodded, as if winning a silent inner argument, and cleared his throat again. “Dear Mr Enan. This letter serves as conformation that the Western Football League, a subsidiary of The Greater Western Districts Football Association will cease operation at the conclusion of the current
season. After careful examination the association has decided that The Western
League is no longer financially viable, and its continued administration represents a
very real threat to the financial stability of the association as a whole.”

Vic, seated on the bench, slumped back against the wall of the clubrooms and
pushed his right forearm against his forehead. He had a sudden memory of Constable
Tom Walsh telling him his mother had died.

There were rumblings from the other players around him, but Brian kept
reading. “‘As you are no doubt aware, The Western League is currently made up of
only four teams, the lowest number of teams in any league the association
administers. It should also be noted that each of these teams is currently in arrears,
with total outstanding fees amounting to over $25 000. Should Henrithvale decide to
pay its outstanding debt it can petition the association to join an established league.
The Henrithvale Football Club can also petition a club already in a league to facilitate
a merger.’”

Brian took one hand off the page and adjusted his glasses. “‘The Greater
Western Districts Football Association notes that admittance to another league or
merger with an established club is unlikely given the vast distances teams already
need to travel and the limited funds available to facilitate such a process.’”

Brian let his left hand, holding the letter, fall to his side as if the weight was
too much. He spoke directly at them. “I know that some of you, perhaps more than I
am aware, have heard rumours or gossip regarding this matter. Well here it is …”

Vic had clear memories, as a child, of waking from nightmares and being
unable to move or speak, like a stunned fish hauled from the waters. This was the
same and he felt a shift, a change in the room, the way it looked, the way sound
moved.
The Greater Western Districts Football Association had already closed three leagues that Vic knew about, amalgamated others, merged some teams and pushed others out. The articles in the papers blamed local councils that needed to move funds into other areas, the increased cost of public liability insurance, and a poorly managed Victorian Rural Ambulance service. There had been three deaths the previous year in games that The Greater Western Districts Football Association oversaw: all heart attacks. In each case it had taken over an hour for an ambulance to arrive. It wasn’t a good look. Vic remembered reading about an oval near the city that had been fenced off to stop people kicking a football because somebody had sued the council when they fell over.

“Is there an appeal process, Brian?” Doc asked, and the players looked to him. Vic found himself rubbing his forehead with the ends of his fingers.

“Yes, there is, and I can tell you an appeal was filed by me in my capacity as club President, with assistance from legal professionals, four weeks ago.”

“When is that letter dated, Brian?” Vic didn’t recognise his own voice. He stood up, feeling dizzy and weak. The players in front of him parted slightly so that Brian and Vic could see each other.

“June the fifth of this year,” he said it quickly. A murmur of discontent rose from the group.

“That’s two months ago, Brian.” Vic spoke loudly, but he could barely hear himself, barely hear Brian. The sound of thunder, or perhaps blood, moving slowly and heavily, sounded in his ears.

“There was never any desire or attempt on my part to deceive anyone,” Brian said. “I can tell you this has hit me for six. At the heart of it, is an administrative
issue. We don’t have a board or a committee, so in my capacity as club president I have handled the situation as best as was reasonably possible.”

“The appeal process, Brian?” Doc reiterated.

Vic sat down on the bench and rested his elbows on his knees, cradling his forehead in his palms. He heard Brian’s voice, dull and distant. Something was leaving, something he did not recognise or understand, but its leaving was terrifying. In its place was a chasm. The room shifted around him. He tried to stand but tumbled sideways.
When Vic woke up there was something different in the way the air smelled, something different in the touch of the sheets. Jane was sitting next to the bed. Beside her was Dave. When he looked at her, Jane stood up and started calling someone. Her voice sounded strange. Dave leant over him, his eyes red from lack of sleep.

“You’re in the hospital mate. Just tell ‘em ya fine.” He looked around as if he were letting Vic in on a secret. “You scared the shit out of Jane and the kids.”

Dave moved back as a nurse and then a doctor came in. Working together they took his blood pressure, shone a light in his eyes and asked him what his name was, what day it was, when he was married, the names of his kids. They asked him if he was under any stress, any more than usual. He said, no, avoiding Jane’s eyes. They told him he had suffered a concussion at football training when he fell over in the clubrooms; he said he couldn’t remember a thing.

They let him go home the next morning. It was a long drive from Bendigo in Jane’s car. Vic didn’t like being a passenger, never had. He was quiet for the first half hour.

“Where are the girls?”

“You’ve asked me that twice now. They’re at school. Dave’s sorting it out.”

Dave and June never had kids of their own. June couldn’t.

“The girls are very worried about you,” Jane offered.

“I’ll be alright,” he muttered.
“Their Dad’s very important to them,” she said, glancing at him. He kept his eyes on the road ahead. “They’ve been asking me if we’re going to move.”

He looked at her.

“What did you tell ‘em?”

Her hands gripped at the steering wheel.

“I said I didn’t know, but that I thought that the answer would be yes.” She waited. “I told them Daddy wasn’t sure.”

He leaned back in the seat, took a yawning breath and looked out of his passenger window. He saw only yellowing fields and steep curved hills. His head was pounding. The hospital had given him the all-clear. He had had a CAT scan, and then another after they injected him with dye.

“What would I do then?” he asked, his eyes on the paddocks outside his window.

“Well, Vic.” Jane sighed. “Maybe you could start by asking, ‘what will we do? What will Jane and Emily and Sarah do?’”

“I’m the one…”

“The one what? The one what, Vic?” She demanded. “I’m the one that takes care of the girls, gets them to school and makes sure they are clothed and fed. I’m the one that makes sure the bills are paid on time. I’m the one…” Her hands held even tighter to the steering wheel. Spots of rain gathered on the windscreen.

He wanted to leave, to open the door and go. He sighed.

“Jane, what do ya want me to say?” He looked over at her. “No worries, we’ll just sell up and off we’ll go? It’s just a farm, just a town. Nothin’ special there. I’ll go off and fly planes for a living.” His voice grew louder as he spoke.
“That’s it, Vic, isn’t it? Your farm, your town, your fucking football club are worth more than your family.” She started to cry.

He hated it when she cried. He reached out a hand, almost withdrew it, and then gently rubbed her thigh. She pushed it away and flicked on the radio. She hadn’t said it yet, he thought to himself. She hadn’t told him she was going to leave, so there was still a chance.

Jane’s car slowed and stopped on the edge of an old bridge. There were road works ahead and traffic going both ways had to share a single lane. Out his window Vic could see what remained of the Red River. Despite the rain of the last few weeks it looked sickly. He could see where its banks had once been, how vast and strong it once was. Now it looked subdued, a victim of land clearing and irrigation leases.

He reclined the seat and shut his eyes. Jane pushed her foot down on the accelerator and the car moved forward.

He thought of the first game he had ever played at a senior level for Henrithvale. They had won by four points, even though Vic had barely had a touch all day. They were two points down late in the last quarter, and there was that pleading with time and with the final siren to wait just a little longer. Three times the ball neared the Henrithvale goals and three times the defence swept it away. Then, when the ball was seventy metres out, Dave let go with a torpedo punt that covered sixty metres, bounced sharply to the left, then the right, avoided two defenders and went through for a goal. The ball was returned to the centre, the umpire bounced it and the siren went. Vic had thought they were going to lose; he had resigned himself to it. Even when the memory of the game visited, as it had now, he still felt they could somehow lose. But they had won.
They were close to home before Vic opened his eyes. As Jane turned into their driveway Vic wound his seat back up. It was then he saw the thin desperado in the field near the front of the house. He was alone, watching Vic from under the brim of his hat. Vic stifled a gasp.

As the car passed the desperado, he stuck out his chin and spat tobacco onto the ground. Vic turned in his seat to watch him.

“Vic? You alright?” Jane’s voice was soft, concerned.

Overhead Vic heard the faraway roll of thunder.

The rain was cold and unrelenting, and Vic’s head had a dull ache that lingered through the morning. To get out of the house, he shifted the ute into the open-faced machinery shed and set to cleaning the vehicle. The wind, raw and bleak, rattled the shed’s corrugated-iron walls but Vic ignored it. He pulled the broken toolbox out from behind the passenger seat and scattered tools over the worn concrete floor. There was an old plumber’s wrench, wrapped in what was left of a T-shirt he had adored thirty years ago.

His mother had given him the T-shirt on a vacation to Queensland. It had been John’s idea to go, an unexpected and out of character decision that was quietly celebrated. John did all the driving, his mother had the passenger window open so the wind pushed back her hair, and Vic was the master of the backseat.

They drove up through New South Wales, barely stopping, and then on into Queensland. Vic recalled the heat, the way his bare legs would stick to the vinyl seats in the back of the borrowed station wagon, and the vibrations of the road. They spent just under two weeks in a caravan park near a tidal river. Nobody knew who John
was, and nobody stopped to talk to him and ask him how he had “pulled up” after the game. Glenda spent most of the time sitting on a banana lounge shaded by the caravan’s open annexe, reading old copies of *Woman’s Day* that had been left in the caravan. Vic had taken up with a motley group of kids around his own age, although he was forever coming back to the caravan, making sure his mother and John were still there. Often he found his mother sleeping away the afternoon, her pale skin turned red in the sun. John stayed inside the caravan, sitting at the undersized kitchen table as if waiting for someone to join him in conversation.

There were a few outings, tourist things. Vic remembered the big pineapple, the big banana and an adventure park that was accessed via a chairlift. Each seat carried two people; Vic rode with his mother, and John rode alone. On the long drive home to Henrithvale, his mother said she wouldn’t mind making a permanent move to a place with a little more sunshine but John hated the idea, said he didn’t know why everyone made “such a big deal out of fuckin’ Queensland.” He said their beer tasted like stale piss warmed in the sun. Vic laughed, but the glare John gave him in the rear view mirror made him stop.

It was the only vacation they ever took. His mother had taken dozens of photos on the way up of John driving and of Vic asleep. There was even one of John and Vic standing stiffly in front of a sign welcoming travellers to Queensland, but no photos were taken on the way back. John drove hunched over the wheel most of the way home, slowly uncoiling the closer they came to Henrithvale. By the time they were just a few hours from home, his right arm was hanging out the open window and his left hand rested gently on top of the steering wheel.

John had barely raised his voice the whole time they were away. Glenda said it was because he wasn’t as stressed and didn’t always need to do something around the
farm, at the football club or for the Grower’s Association. At home she had asked
John if they could take more vacations, just a week every year or so to a caravan park
or campsite, but John had berated her for wanting to throw money away on things
they couldn’t afford. Eventually she stopped asking.

The T-shirt that was wrapped around the wrench was a memento of some
gorge they had visited. It had gold cursive writing across the front that read
‘Queensland − The Sunshine State.’ Vic only wore it once after they returned to
Henrithvale because of the way John looked at it. Vic had stuck the T-shirt under the
bottom drawer of his bedroom tall boy and had forgotten about it until it was too
small to be of any use. Somehow it had ended up in the machinery shed and now it
kept the plumber’s wrench warm.

Vic saw Jane returning from shopping. She stopped her car next to the shed and
wound down the window, just enough for her voice to be heard.

“Thought you were going to take it easy?” There was no keeping the rain out
and she brushed it from her eyes.

“That’s what I’m doin’.”

“It’s cold out here.”

“I’m alright. Don’t notice after a while.” The shed had a smell of mice and
fertiliser that became heavier in the rain. Vic found it comforting.

“You want a coffee?”

“Nah.” He looked at her, heard the softness in her voice, and noticed the tips
of his fingers and nose felt numb. “Actually, yeah, alright. Just give us a minute.”
She wound up the window and drove the car the fifteen metres to the carport. Vic studied all the things he had dragged out of the ute, which looked like the pieces of some unsolvable puzzle. He ducked his head and dashed through the rain to the house.

In the kitchen he sat down at the table and waited for the kettle to boil.

“I was talking to mum,” Jane began. She paused from unpacking the bags of groceries and turned to watch him. He felt as if he had been lured into something. The kettle boiled and Jane poured water into each cup so that the coffee aroma washed through the room. Then she sat opposite him. Vic could see shallow lines at the corners of her eyes and the side of her mouth; he hadn’t seen them before and they seemed out of place. He had noticed similar changes in his own appearance but they did not bother him, they did not seem real. Jane put her forearms on the table as if to steady her resolve and looked down at the space that separated them.

“Go on.” He shifted so that more of his body weight was off the seat than was on it, and then he glanced across to make sure the back door wasn’t locked.

“You saw the brochures I got the other week, from Bendigo?”

“Yep.”

“I think,” she paused. “I want to enrol in something for next year.”

“You should do what makes you happy.” That’s what his mother had always told him. It was her way of saying, “if you want to put your own needs ahead of others then go ahead.” He rubbed at his forehead with the fingertips of his left hand. Jane seemed to want him to say something more.

“Vic.”

He could see the tears. He looked down at the table, stained and scarred.

“I reckon it’ll be alright.” He felt detached from the words.
“Vic, it’s been months.”

Vic looked up and saw the heat from the coffee had fogged part of the window.

“You can do them courses by mail, ya know…”

Jane stood up, covered her mouth with her left hand and hurried out of the room. He got up to follow her, but stopped, feeling suddenly as if someone was watching him. He saw the thin desperado outside the foggy window, close enough to have heard everything.

Vic pushed out through the back door without thinking what he would do or say. He moved quickly around the house in the rain, but the desperado was gone. Vic felt the rain soak through his shirt. He stared across the fields to his father’s tree and a sudden gale turned the corner of the house behind him with a long, low whistle. It prodded him forward and then relented.

“You ain’t the subtle type that’s for sure.” Vic turned. The desperado was right behind him. He motioned to the far off tree with a nod of his head and blew the rain from his moustache. “We best take a walk.”

Vic followed the desperado through the dense grass. They were behind the orchard of new trees. The desperado had flouted custom and the uncertainty of it made Vic feel small, childlike.

He had no desire, no interest, in being near his father’s tree, but the desperado cut a path over the marshy ground behind the orchard as Vic struggled along behind. The land here would sometimes hold water for weeks, breeding plagues of mosquitoes. Vic’s socks and pants were soon as soaked as his shirt from the long and wet grass. At the tree the desperado took off his hat and emptied the brim of the rain water that had gathered there.
“That old boy skinned out,” the desperado said as he turned to face Vic.

“Thought he might. Never did like spendin’ so long waitin’ on somethin’.”

“You’re alone then,” Vic asked as he glanced at the tree. He didn’t want to touch its branches or the fallen and brittle leaves that were scattered around it. He felt suddenly warm and thought he could smell burning oil.

“Alone? Ain’t we all.” The desperado smiled and sat down. Leaning against the tree, he looked up at the heavy sky, the rain coming through foliage of the tree and onto his face. “This is one miserable shit of a place. Can understand why you’re so damn certain to be rid of it.”

Vic squatted down in the grass as if weighted down by the rain. He felt like a drowned man who had been brought back to life. The rain pummelled him and he felt it running down the back of his ears, over his eyebrows and into the corners of his eyes.

“This the tree, ain’t it?” Vic looked at the desperado but didn’t answer. “Let me tell you somethin’.” The desperado kicked at the ground with the heels of his boots. “Some years back I found myself workin’ as deputy in Arizona territory. Had a man in a cell waitin’ ta hang. Built the gallows right outside his window. Day before it was set he says he needs one more day, jus’ one more to get himself right. Sheriff gives it to him. I expect that man had somethin’ he was plannin’ on, but at the end of his one more day there ain’t nothin’, so he begs and cries for jus’ one more day. An’ Sheriff gives it to him. This goes on near a week an’ people want to see a hangin’ so Sheriff tells that man his time is up. I ask this man what he is waitin’ on, what he thought might happen. Know what he said?”

Vic shook his head and felt the hard wind push against his side so that he had to touch the wet ground with his right hand to keep his balance.
“He says he was jus’ hopin’ somethin’ would happen. Thought if he stayed long enough it was sure to work out. I bet he was thinkin’ that even when they put that rope around his neck. Probably thinkin’ it while he pissed in his pants.”

Vic looked at the lush grass, the rain running downinside the back of his shirt.

“What else could he do?” Vic asked softly, looking up.

The desperado leaned forward and spoke in a low voice.

“Anythin’ he damn well pleased. Weren’t nothin’ more he could lose.” The desperado stood up. “Need to be goin’.” He walked away from the tree in the direction of the station house that waited beyond the hills. Vic watched him until he disappeared into the haze of the rain.

Vic had been close to his father’s tree only one other time since the accident. It was before he and Jane were married. Vic had never told anyone — not even Jane — but he thought that dying was the nicest thing that John had ever done for him. He only wished he had done it sooner, when his mother was still alive. Yet the old man remained and Vic could not separate him from Glenda. Vic scurried over to the tree as thunder broke suddenly overhead. Gently, carefully, he leant against the tree, sitting just as the desperado had done. The rough trunk of the tree felt harsh and uncomfortable against his back. Its canopy provided little shelter. Through the rain he could see the farmhouse and it seemed much further away than it had ever been before.

He went in the back door, and Jane stared at him as she hung up the phone. His clothes were drenched and he felt caught within them.
He stepped forward, put out his arms and pulled her against him. He wasn’t even sure what he was asking for or what he was offering. She pushed out of his embrace, wiped the tears from her face and looked down at her own clothes, now damp with the impression of him.

“I could do it part-time, Thursday and Friday, on campus at Bendigo,” she said, looking up at him.

“Go down on Wednesday night and come back Friday night,” he added. “For how long?”

“Five years, maybe six.”

Perhaps it could work. He could manage to get the girls to school two days a week, take care of the lunches, cook the dinner. Maybe it would be good for him. She seemed to let him think about it, and then she took a breath and spoke quickly. “Full-time I’d be done in three years.”

“Full-time? Five days a week.”

“We could stay with Mum and Dad.”

“We?” He was snared.

“The girls could go to school in Bendigo. Bigger schools, better opportunities.” He saw then that she was trying to leave him but didn’t want him to know it.

“It sounds like you’re tellin’ me you’re goin’.” He knew he shouldn’t have said it.

Her eyes closed and her hands twisted into fists.

“I’m not your mother. I can’t just stay here…”
A roar of noise rocked him backwards. It was as if some towering wave had caught him unaware and pushed him down under the water, so that he wasn’t sure how to find the surface.

His mother had stayed for him. Everything had been for him, and Jane knew it. His mother had made sure that she had suffered and not Vic. And she got nothing for it, nothing. There was only Vic to know, Vic to remember, and if he wasn’t here, if he didn’t make something of it, then it didn’t mean anything.

“My mother …” The words were barely a whisper and he didn’t know if he was standing or sitting, but something was working its way up through his chest. He clenched his hands across his heart and pulled air into his lungs with loud sucking breaths.

Jane took a step backwards. Vic could see her lips moving, forming the sound of his name. He turned and pushed out the door, back into the rain and the cold wind. He started to walk, stumbled, and then broke into a staggering run towards the ute parked in the shed. He climbed inside and drove, as if pursued, towards the orchard. The ute skidded as he rounded a soft turn. He overcorrected and went into a slide, stalling. He held tight to the steering wheel and heard the coarse sounds of his own erratic breathing.

Jane was right. She wasn’t his mother, he thought. She wasn’t even close.
Brian had called in the afternoon to let Vic know there was an extraordinary meeting for members of the Grower’s Association. Vic arrived early and sat in the ute watching the shadows around the school building turn to darkness. Brian was running late. Other cars arrived but their drivers, like Vic, seemed to take Brian’s absence as a bad omen and remained in their vehicles. When Dave Foster arrived he parked next to Vic. Vic got out of the ute and opened his palms to the night sky as Dave walked over to meet him.

“Brian’s not here,” Vic said.

“Bullshit.” The interior light from the ute was not strong enough to illuminate Dave’s features, but Vic could make out his disbelief. The wind ruffled his hair.

Dave walked over to the school building and jerked on the door handle. It was locked. “The Old Clock’s slowin’ ...” He was interrupted by the brusque sound of Brian Enan’s early FJ Holden hurtling into the car park.

Brian struggled out of his car and a crowd started to form around him.

“Brian,” Vic said loudly. “Thought you’d forgotten us.”

“Well, many hands make light work, but it is my hands on which we all rely and there is simply more than I can do.” Brian tucked in his shirt and closed the car door.

“Give you a hand, Brian?” Vic asked.

“Certainly. There are two boxes in the backseat that don’t have legs.”
Brian shuffled gruffly towards the school building. Vic reached into the backseat, took out a box and handed it to Dave. He had to climb onto the backseat to reach the other.

Growing up, he had been in the backseat of Brian’s car a thousand times, going to and from football games. The interior of the car carried the same stale musk smell that it had then. He remembered the times that he and Dave had been in the backseat together, with Brian driving them home after a game. Dave would often try to pluck a hair from Brian’s head. “I will thank you, Master Foster, to keep your hands to yourself,” was Brian’s restrained response. It would send them into fits of muffled laughter.

Inside Brian was busy making sure the lights were on and the heater was working.

The room was swelling with farmers and local business owners that Brian had telephoned. Vic presumed that Brian’s abrupt disposition was the result of someone who had grown tired of his calls and told him in some obscene way to refrain from telephoning. Vic and Dave started rearranging the chairs, and then Vic heard the sound of Brian’s car. He had driven away.

“Reckon he mighta got himself a woman,” Dave said with a grin that looked for approval.

People broke into groups and began to hypothesise as to where Brian might be. Vic sat quietly and thought how easy it would be if Brian never returned, but twenty minutes later Brian drove back into the school car park and hobbled into the classroom. People sat down, and Brian made his way to his seat, pressed record on the tape recorder and gave the date. He paused and sat upright in his chair, looking over the room.
“Don’t reckon we’ll get any more,” Vic said from his seat.

“Well, it is disappointing given the gravity of our situation, but we will soldier on.”

Brian took attendance and began organising his paper work, moving sheets from one folder to the next and seemingly back again. There was growing unease, and then Brian finally spoke.

“Those of you unfamiliar with the Henrithvale region might be surprised to know the area once held a thriving supply of Aboriginal people of the Wergaia clan, or however you say it.” He looked around the room but nobody spoke. “Be that as it may, this once happy hunting ground for those unfortunates was no longer thought to contain a trace of them. However, in recent weeks, recent months…”

“Is there a point to this, Brian?” Rob Masterson’s sharp voice cut into Brian’s words. Vic turned to look at him. He was a huge man, broad shoulders and long legs, but his sullen face with its small features seemed in disproportion to the rest of his body. He no longer played football but kept the Henrithvale CFA branch going.

“Yes, Robert there is a point to it.” Brian sat up in his chair and adjusted his glasses. Vic returned his focus to Brian. “The point is this: a sizeable part of Henrithvale is being assessed by people from La Trobe University no less to see if it qualifies as a place of cultural value belonging to those Aboriginal people.”

“What do they want it back?” Rob mocked. Some laughed, but Vic remembered the stories about how it was Rob’s great grandfather who had been among those who made sure there were no longer any Wergaia people in the area. When he and Rob and Dave were in the fifth grade a harsh drought had dried up many of the small dams in the area for the first time in more than a century. The dam on the Masterson’s property had revealed the bones of fifteen Wergaia people. Rob had taken two of the skulls into school for show-and-tell and had considered them prized trophies. Mrs
Summerset, a gentle but determined woman who was at the school only a year, had confiscated them and called the police. There was a reluctant investigation and a group from La Trobe University took the bones away. There had been a small article about it in *The Bendigo Advertiser*, saying it was not known how the bones got into the Masterson’s dam. And there was a photo of a youthful Rob, taken at home before Mrs Summerset’s intervention, smiling with a skull balanced on each shoulder.

“No doubt some distant descendant does,” Brian said, without humour, “but a positive finding for such an assessment would lead to Henrithvale being marked as a place of cultural importance and value for these people.”

“And?”

“Robert, you are bewildering at times.” Brian, Vic thought, was not out of place at the front of a classroom. “In such circumstances it would be near impossible to construct a dam of any sort lest something is lost. Without the prospect of a dam there is no good reason for the requisition of irrigation leases.”

Nobody spoke. Vic looked at Rob. He brushed his hands over his face and leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees and bringing his hands together. His feet bounced a few times. Then he looked up at Brian.

“You called everyone out to say because some Abos lived here you reckon everythin’ll be alright?”

“What exactly does it mean, Brian?” It was Doc’s voice that, as usual, was trying to blunt confrontation. He must have come in late and was standing at the back of the room, his thin face unshaved.

“I made it known several months ago.” Brian’s voice was strong. “But I only received word yesterday that something might come of it. You should all know this, and know it clearly.” Brian’s voice became stern, his back straightened and his hands
slapped down on the table in front of him so that the papers shifted. “We don’t have the strength to land a knockout blow. If we are going to overcome this it will be by scraping forward one inch at a time.” He looked around the room then settled his eyes on Rob. “Here is another inch or two.”

Rob stood up with a sudden jerk and pointed at Brian.

“You’re a fuckin’ idiot, Enan! Abos and a fuckin’ dam?” He marched towards the door and stopped. “It’s irrigation leases they’re takin’, that’s the reality,” he added, turning around to glare at Brian again. “The dam is all in that fuckin’ empty head of yours.” He pulled open the door and left, letting the door slam closed behind him. In the quiet Vic could hear the wind outside. People shifted their eyes to Brian.

“United we stand, divi….”

“There was another article on the front page of The Advertiser today,” Doc offered from the back. Vic watched as he picked his way across the room with his long legs to hand Brian the paper. Brian held it up for everyone to see the headline: “A Dam Mess.”

There had been too many such articles for Vic to remember. From the moment the government began the compulsory requisition of irrigation leases, there had been rumours it was part of a bigger plan to dam the valley and that would put Henrithvale underwater. Vic didn’t believe that there was necessarily much to it, but the papers loved it.

“Is that it then, Brian?” Dave spoke for everybody.

“There is something else you need to be made aware of, something that has come to light today.” Brian looked at his paperwork. “This, I should qualify, did not reach me through official channels. Nevertheless, our government, in its infinite
wisdom,” he took in a deep breath, “has apparently given the green light to a relaxed approach to apple and pear imports from China.”

Brian let out a sigh, but the room was silent. There wasn’t the energy to rise up anymore. Vic felt it in himself. He surveyed the room, looking at all of the men, most with their arms folded across their chests, their eyes red from lack of sleep, none of them making any real money. The details of the deal didn’t matter. Cheaper imports were dangerous. They would erode the market share of local produce. There might still be room for local growers; there just wouldn’t be as much room as there had been.

Vic heard the wind harass the building. In the years when Henrithvale was a successful football club the notion of losing, always losing, was not something they ever needed to consider. If they didn’t get a premiership one year, then it would definitely be next year or the year after. When Vic started playing senior football the club’s fortunes had declined, but the expectations, the hope, were not surrendered so easily. As the distance between premiership triumphs lengthened, there was a changing of coaches, a changing of approaches, an urgency to find out what it was that had stopped the club from winning. Vic sensed behind it all was a fear that something was rotten, something that could not be fixed. Soon came the heavy losses, by eighty points, one hundred and twenty points, two hundred points, week after week and year after year. All of those great things that Vic had watched John do, watched Henrithvale achieve, for so many years, now seemed to belong to the past. Nothing was said, but there was a shift, an awareness that Henrithvale would not win, could not win. Every week and every season had offered the chance to start again, but the feeling that winning was impossible became an infection that festered, sickening any chance of success. Vic felt it in his own game. He started to notice how big the field
was, how far away the goals were, how slowly he moved. The kind of victory that might announce a return to those golden years never happened. There were too many games that Henrithvale didn’t win; too many times they were unable to hold on. Every week Brian spoke with passion, pleading with his players to give more, but they could not and did not know how.

“I’m going to say something now,” Brian said, focusing on the children’s pictures that decorated the walls. “My family, like many of you here now, have been in the Henrithvale area for generations. There were droughts, fire and everything else to contend with, but they pushed on. We can only move forwards an inch at a time and we are only beaten when we say we are beaten…”


Dave’s voice was soft. “Focus on the footy. Put in the hard yards at training.”

When everyone had left, Vic and Dave helped Brian stack away the chairs, then carried Brian’s boxes to his car. They watched him drive away in silence. The car park was empty except for them. Dave got into his car, started the engine and wound down his window.

“Dunno why he said that, ya know, about imports.” Dave shook his head, his face illuminated by the interior light in his car. “It was like a kick in everyone’s ball sack. All he’ll fuckin’ do is make people sign on the dotted line.”

“I dunno.” Vic said. “See ya tomorrow.” He watched Dave drive away before he climbed into the cab of the ute. He started the engine, switched on the headlights and saw the desperado standing a few metres away, squinting in the glare of the lights.

Vic left the engine running but slowly got out of the car.
“Horse’d never do that to a man,” the desperado said and stepped away from the lights towards Vic. “You quit so damn quick it’s surprisin’ you ain’t still crawlin’ aroun’ an’ suckin’ on the teat.”

There was a change in the desperado. He stood closer to Vic so that Vic could smell a scent of freshly turned earth and burning autumn leaves. In the darkness beyond them Vic knew there was something strange and unyielding, something he needed to be away from. He looked back towards the ute.

“I’d be leavin’ too if I was you,” the desperado said, and flicking his head towards something behind him.

Vic got back into the ute, locked the door and drove away. At home Sarah and Emily would be waiting, glad to see him. When the road home curved he saw his father’s tree in the headlights, haunting the paddock. Vic thought for the first time about how easy it would be on a wet night for a car to slide off the road and into a tree.
It was raining again in the morning, but just clearing showers, nothing heavy. Vic sat at the kitchen table, his hands wrapped tightly around a warm coffee. He watched through the kitchen window as clouds, a dull grey sheet of them, rolled down through the valley. It was early and there was barely light in the day. Jane and the girls were still in bed. Vic remembered that this is what John had done most mornings. Whenever Vic caught the scent of morning coffee it came with a picture of John sitting just where he was now. He had to check the dams, the rain gauge near the orchard gave him the feeling they would be near full. He could not remember the last time he had to pump water out of a dam.

The phone rang, and the coffee cup, which he was lifting to his mouth, slipped from his grasp, hit the edge of the table and smashed on the floor. He looked at it for a moment before he hurried over to answer the phone.

“Hello.” Vic watched the coffee steam from the broadening pool on the kitchen floor.

“Good morning, Vic, this is Brian Enan, calling as President of The Henrithvale Grower’s Association.” He waited as if he expected to be interrupted. “Now this is going to sound like you are getting the run around…”

“Brian, just save everyone a trip.” The coffee seeped in between the gaps in the floorboards

“This is of utmost significance.”
“Another bloody meeting. Christ, Brian.” There is no such thing as dying with
dignity, he thought.

“Yes, Vic, another meeting.”

Vic thought about the desperado in the car park; about the shifting boundaries,
the pliability of the old rules. He wondered if he should keep away from Jane, from
the girls, lest the desperado work into that space.

“Alright,” he said softly.

Vic let out a sigh and hung up the phone. Jane was behind him.

“Something wrong?” she asked.

“Broke the bloody coffee cup.” Vic made his way over to the kitchen sink and
found a sponge and a tea towel.

“Who was on the phone?” Jane was huddled inside a dirty pink dressing gown.

“Brian. Wants to have another meetin’ tonight.” Vic knelt on the floor and set
about cleaning up the coffee and broken cup.

“Another meeting? What happened last night?” Her tone said she didn’t
believe him. Where did she think he was going?

“Brian still reckons it’s all about how the government wants to build a dam.
He reckons he can block it because Henrithvale has Aboriginal significance.”

Vic saw Jane roll her eyes. He got up and put the broken pieces of the coffee
cup in the bin. He looked at Jane.

“Plans for the day?” he asked, wiping his hands on his jeans.

“Actually, I’ve got an appointment to speak to a student adviser at the
university on the phone at eleven.” Her voice pushed forward a feeble confidence.

“Right.” The back door was close.

“How’s your head?” Jane asked.
“It’s alright. Not much to damage I don’t reckon.”

She reached out a hand. He took it in his, but wasn’t sure what she wanted him to know. Perhaps, he thought, she was telling him that he had played well, he had done his best, but he had lost, and that was okay.

“I was looking for my high school results last night. I found some old photos. You and your mum.” Her words were cautious and soft. He folded his arms nervously across his chest. “You look about eight or nine.”

She went into the lounge room and returned with a shoebox. Vic and Jane sat at the table together. Vic had no memory of the photos being taken and no memory of having seen the photos before. He didn’t understand how they had escaped John’s purge. In the photos he was smiling, his teeth too big for his face, and so was his mother, but not as if they had been asked to smile just for the sake of the picture. Their faces were alive with joy. Who had taken the photos? John? Not likely.

“That’s great.” He smiled broadly at Jane; couldn’t help it. Jane squeezed his hand again. Perhaps there were other photos yet to be discovered, something more to uncover.

The day was still and cold, buried under engorged winter clouds. Vic spent most of it in the orchard, his thoughts drifting between the photos Jane had found and the life she was planning without him. The weather made his skin ache and he felt as if he were collapsing. He trudged back to the house in the early afternoon. Jane was standing in the doorway between the lounge room and the kitchen, a coffee cup in her hands, her eyes puffy. There was a collection of brochures on the bench next to an envelope marked La Trobe University.
“Day alright?” he asked and felt a surge of enthusiasm.

There were freshly washed dishes in the drying rack. He picked up a tea towel and began drying plates.

“How’d you go?” he asked. Jane’s shoulders hunched, and she turned away from him. Vic recognised the gestures. When they’d first met she used to do it more often: feel beaten by something. It disappeared more-or-less once the girls were born.

“Jane?”

He dropped the tea towel and put his hand on her thin shoulders. She turned into him, and they embraced. She let him rub her back and kiss her on the head. Then she wiped her eyes awkwardly with her forearm, trying not to spill her coffee.

“It was a stupid idea. I couldn’t do full-time, even if I got in. Not with the girls. Part-time maybe.” She leaned her head against his chest, and he could smell the coffee mixed in with the remnants of her perfume. “They said I had a better shot at TAFE, but I should do a short course before that.” He had a feeling akin to a momentum shift in a football game when an opponent had run out of opportunities. He didn’t want her to see it.

“I need to pick the girls up,” she said, pulling away from him, but smiling in what Vic thought was appreciation. Jane swallowed the last of her coffee and put the empty cup on the bench. Then, with her thumbs, she cleared away the tears from under her eyes. When she was gone, Vic headed for the shower, his body tense with a new hope.

Vic could hear the girls crying before they opened the back door.
“Daddy!” Sarah ran in and clung to his waist, burying her face in his stomach. Emily followed. He gently rubbed their heads and looked at Jane, who was holding onto a letter in one hand and her car keys in the other, a handbag slung over her shoulder.

“What’s goin’ on?” Vic asked. Emily pulled herself away from him for a moment. She looked at him with tear-filled eyes.

“They’re closing the school,” she said.

“What?” He looked at Jane, staggered.

“Sent this letter home to all the parents,” Jane said waving the letter at him. “It’s from the Department of Education.” She dropped her keys and handbag on the table and started reading, contempt in her voice. “‘We regret to advise that Henrithvale Consolidated School will be permanently closed at the conclusion of the current school year. A decline in student numbers over several years, combined with poor future intake projections, based on census information, makes the school no longer economically viable.’”

“This is bullshit,” Vic uttered. He knew what it meant.

“Listen to this part.” She found the section she was looking for with her finger. “‘The Department of Education will be providing students with a half-day counselling program. We regret any inconvenience this may cause you and your family.’”

“Any inconvenience!” He wanted to lash out, punch at the wall, but the girls were still wrapped around his waist.

“They’ve got it all figured out.” She continued reading. “‘The Department of Education has agreed to provide a shuttle service to Kerang for the first six months of the following year provided ten or more students require the service.’” Her eyes were wide and her voice sang of a great iniquity.
“Kerang! They want the kids to spend three hours a day on the fuckin’ bus?”

“Vic, language.”

Jane had never been a fan of profanity. Vic wondered if she would have been better off with Brian Enan. Then he found himself wondering why Jane wasn’t looking more triumphant. She had him now; it was finished.

He knelt down so that he was at eye level with Emily and Sarah.

“I don’t wanna go to a new school,” Emily sniffed. Her nose and mouth reminded him of his mother. “It’s not fair.”

“There is a meeting tomorrow morning at the school,” Jane said.

“It’s meeting after meeting these days,” Vic muttered. Emily let him go, wiping her own tears, and Vic stood up. “Someone crosses the bloody street and there needs to be a meeting.”

“Daddy,” Emily said. “I don’t wanna go on a bus for three hours every day.”

“We’ll work somethin’ out, Sweetie. Alright. Mum and I will go to the meeting and we’ll work something out.”

It didn’t seem right to Vic that a school could be closed just like that, without forewarning. He wondered if Jane had been selective in what she had read to him: he needed to see the letter for himself. No doubt this news was why Brian had called another meeting.

Vic left early for the Grower’s Association meeting. He had no answer if the school closed and Jane, he thought, knew it. There was no need to say anything. The night was still, so his breath showed in the cold. There were pockets of mist spreading across the road. He wondered if Brian had a solution, not likely. He knew he couldn’t panic and say something he couldn’t take back, he had to wait and see.
Vic slowed the ute to a crawl as he neared the school, but saw that only Brian’s car was in the car park and headed into town to see Herbert and Edna.

The door to the shop was locked, but the interior light was on and Vic could see Herbert inside taking stock off the shelves. Vic tapped on the door. Herbert saw him and shuffled over.

“Here he is,” Herbert said cheerfully, opening the door enough for Vic to come in. There were boxes on the floor; most of the shelves were bare.

“Redecorating, Jack?” Vic smiled.

Herbert managed a smile in return, but his face was greyish. He quietly continued to empty the shelves.

“Lily has come up,” he finally said, dropping the last of some magazines into a box. “She’s with Edna out back.”

“Everything alright, Jack?”

Herbert put his hands on his hips, seemed about to speak and then stopped. He turned to face Vic.

“Look, I didn’t want to say anything. Thought I’d just send a letter.” He started tapping his left foot in quick rhythm then stopped. “We’ll go down to the city with Lily tomorrow.”

“Yeah, you said you were heading down for a while.”

Herbert’s eyes told Vic things had changed. There was a wateriness to them and beyond that there was a disappointment.

“We’re moving down, move Edna…” Herbert held his breath and then swallowed it. “Move Edna into a hospice and I’ll stay with Lily. Keep it that way.”

“Hello, Dad?” Vic turned around to see Lily, Herbert’s and Edna’s second-oldest daughter. She was taller than Vic remembered, her hair a shiny red. She smiled
and looked at him a moment. “Oh my goodness, Vic? How are you?” She stepped forward, and he kissed her on the cheek.

“Yeah, can’t complain. All’s good.” He shifted back towards the door.

“It’s nice to see you.” She smiled. She made the best pumpkin soup he’d ever had. He remembered her making it when he would visit with his mother but Lily would never part with the recipe. “So you have two daughters now?”

“Yep, Emily and Sarah, nine and seven.”

“Wonderful, just wonderful.” Vic knew Lily had never married, wasn’t that way inclined. She turned her attention to Herbert. “Soup is done, Dad.”

“Alright, Love,” Herbert nodded his head.

“It was great to see you again, Vic.” Lily reached out her left hand and squeezed his right arm. Vic felt vaguely like he was still a boy she was taking care of.

“Yeah, you too,” he muttered, and Lily disappeared back through the doorway and into the house.

“Haven’t said anything to anyone,” Herbert said to Vic, looking at the floor.

“Think I prefer it that way.”

“Yeah, yeah alright.”

More changes, Vic thought, more shifting boundaries. The fragility frightened him, but he couldn’t be angry, not at Herbert and Edna. He didn’t think he would still be alive now if they hadn’t been around after his mother died.

“Come by in the morning, Vic. We’ll push off around eleven.” Herbert walked over and opened the door.

Vic left and got back into the ute without turning around. He drove slowly and the road was quiet, deserted. There had barely been any light in the day and darkness had made haste over the hills. He remembered the first time he had driven Jane
around Henrithvale, a week after meeting her at Doc’s wedding. He showed her the football ground, the pub, the school and introduced her to Edna. It rained the whole time. They had a picnic near the orchard under a tarp he stretched between two trees. He remembered feeling like his mother was smiling at him, like he had a lifetime ahead of him.

As he drove towards the Grower’s Association meeting at the school, he wondered if anyone else had agreed to come in for another meeting, but when Vic pulled into the car park, at least a dozen cars were already there. He wondered if they knew about the school closure, if they felt, like he did, that it was a fatal blow. He parked next to Dave’s car and went into the classroom. The chairs were already set out but there was none of the other paraphernalia, no pamphlets or forms or newsletters. Vic nodded greetings as he crossed the room to where Dave, June and others were talking about the school closure. People around the room stood in solemn groups shaking their heads in disbelief, stating their objections and recalling their own school days. He noticed pencil shavings on the floor and the hands of the wall clock frozen at five-fifteen. More and more Vic just wanted it to be done with.

“Bit late, Vic.” Dave winked. “I got me fuckin’ sleepin’ bag in the car. Save me the trouble of comin’ back tomorra.” He sipped quickly at a cup of tea, dirt from his hands marking the battered cup.

“Here’s Brian.” Dave said nodding towards the door as Brian limped through the crowd with the same stern determination he had when he was about to give the three-quarter-time address. He was wearing brown pants and a pastel yellow shirt with a wide brown tie. Dave let out part of a wolf-whistle that Brian stopped with a glare.
“We’ll get things underway if we can, please.” Brian stood at the front of the room. He seemed to want a stage, even a raised platform. “It is right on six, but those that come late can learn a valuable lesson in organisation.” People sat down or stood, leaning against the wall near the door. Brian held some papers in his hands, was about to speak and then noticed that the record button on his tape player had not been pressed. He stepped forward, leaned over the tape player on the desk and hesitantly set the tape in motion. Then he resumed his seat. “Before we call the meeting to order I would like to thank you for attending on such short notice. Difficult times bring difficult and complex…”

“Is there a point, Brian?” Rob Masterson was coiled near the door, arms folded. Vic was surprised to see him. There was an ugly beer stink that followed his words. It was faint but Vic knew it well. Rob, Vic thought, was just another version of John. One that couldn’t kick a ball.

“Yes, there is, and the point is this.” Brian’s voice was firm. “Yesterday I announced that I had word the government was opening up markets to China for the import of apples and pears. Today announcements were made that show this will indeed be the case. Grim news.” He searched the room, but there was little in the way of a response. “However,” he looked back down at the papers in his hands, “there will be a further announcement tomorrow that this opening of markets will be met with increased subsidies for Australian growers.” He pressed the broad brown tie against his chest. “To put that in layman’s terms, your income, your market share, will be guaranteed. Indexed.”

“Bullshit!” Rob called out.
“I can tell you that the Farmer’s Unions at a state and federal level, together with the Grower’s Association, have worked long and hard.” Brian watched as people leaned back in their chairs and smiled.

Vic saw Dave give June a worried look, but other voices started to speak with excitement, but Vic did not see it as enough to diminish the school closure. He looked down at his hands. The palms were still dirty and so were his fingernails. His mother used to scrub them every night before he went to bed until he was twelve. He protested and resisted but was glad for it.

“There is another matter I need to address.” Brian raised his voice until the noise subsided. “No doubt you have heard, in one way or another, that moves are afoot to close this school.” He scoffed and shook his head, and his jowls made him sound horse-like.

Somebody behind Vic booed and it made Vic wonder if they understood how significant such a move would be. There had been articles in The Advertiser all year about falling enrolments and the urgent need for repairs to school buildings, and not just in Henrithvale.

“There will be a meeting here for all concerned tomorrow morning at nine sharp.” Brian leaned forward, wagging his pointer finger. “These so-and-sos in government need to understand that Henrithvale will not be intimidated.”

Vic looked sideways at Dave’s grim face. Maybe Rob Masterson was right.

Vic left as soon as the meeting finished. It was as cold as it had been all year. He rubbed his hands together and got the ute started. The heater in the ute never seemed to do more than shift the cold air around and he drove hunched forward as the windscreen fogged over. He could see the house lights as he approached the driveway. The farm, Jane, the football club and now the school were like a knot, he
thought; he needed to work carefully and thoughtfully to create space. There had to be a way.

He parked the ute in the carport. As he stepped out of the vehicle, he thought he heard something, someone, behind him, but he couldn’t see anything in the night. He went quickly through the back door.

Jane had set aside a plate for Vic, and he ate it while watching TV with the girls. Later, he read to them while they were in bed, a few chapters from *Watership Down*. He had started it a few months ago and didn’t know if it would take but they adored it. He wasn’t sure they understood everything that was going on, Sarah asked a lot of questions, but they understood enough that he had to leave the rabbits that roamed the farm to do as they please. His mother read it to him when he was ten and it became a shared adventure. When he turned out the light in their room they didn’t seem any more reassured.

He walked through to the lounge room and Jane was sitting on the couch in front of a blank TV screen. He sat down next to her. He had an odd sense that his mother was in another room, and that when he had to leave the house in which he had spent his entire life, he would leave her there too.

“I’ll give Mum a call tomorrow,” Jane said. “Get her to find something out about schools in Bendigo.”

“Let’s go to the meeting first, yeah?”

“The situation won’t change because you or Brian Enan makes a speech,” Vic noted the sudden shift in tone.

He stood up wanting to say something that would make her see she was wrong, that she owed him, that he was being cheated and that she was in cahoots with
the banks and the politicians. But there was only a harrowing sadness. He left the room and went to bed.
In the morning Jane drove the girls to school. A forlorn coldness had settled into the house and it fostered a lethargy that Vic could not ward off. He watched the rain make the world beyond the window a blur. He still hadn’t checked the dams but it didn’t seem like Jane would be swayed by him declaring there was ample water available for the coming season. There had been games when no matter how hard he tried he could not kick the ball where he wanted it to go. He had missed shots at goal that seemed a certainty. Yet there were other games where everything he did, no matter how awkward, worked just as he had hoped. Maybe it was luck.

His grandfather had always said, “you make your own luck.” For a long time he had believed it, but not anymore. He wondered why it was that fortune gave to some and not others. If the requisition of the irrigation leases had happened to John, it would have been a blessing— for him and his mother at least. Then, perhaps, his mother might not have died.

The phone rang four times before he got up to answer it because he knew who it would be.

“Good morning, this is Brian Enan, President of the...”

“Yes, Brian.”

“As you’re no doubt aware there has been circulation of a letter announcing the closure of the school.”

“Yeah, I read it last night.” He pressed the receiver against his ear and stared at the oil stain on the roof above the stove.
“There is a meeting this morning at the school. We need to show those powers-that-be this school …”

“Brian, Emily and Sarah both attend the school so I’ll be there regardless.”

Vic could hear Brian thinking, crafting some more words he clearly wanted Vic to have.

“There is a feeling, I can tell you this much, that the end of the school might push people to make hasty decisions.”

“I’ll see you at the meeting, Brian.” Vic kept the receiver pressed against his ear long after Brian ended the call, listening to the static and the dim and unrecognisable voices caught in the noise.

Vic bolted through the rain to the machinery shed. Once he was inside the rain turned to hail, thick and hard, cutting in sideways with the churning wind. There was nothing for him to do, he realised, nothing he wanted to do. He sat on the fertiliser bags piled along the wall. If he left this place, left this town, he would be a ghost.

He stayed in the machinery shed until it was time to go to the meeting and then drove to the school with the rain and hail battering the ute. Jane was waiting for him under the eaves by the main entrance. The car park was full, so he parked on the road and ran through the rain gathering with Jane and the other parents in the staffroom. A plump woman in a casual black suit, with a name tag on her right shoulder, welcomed them in and started the meeting.

“Hi,” she began, smiling and making deliberate eye contact with as many people as she could. “My name is Roxy Pemberton and I’m here from the Department of Education along with my colleague, Anthony Hamilton,” she gestured to a tall thin
man in a light brown suit and poorly shaped goatee, “to assist and advise parents and care providers during school transitions.” She paused. “I just want to start off by saying what a beautiful town you have.”

Vic thought there would be more animosity, but he quickly got the feeling that people just wanted to know how it would all work, so they could adapt and move on. They were crowded into the staff room and Jane had turned in her chair so that her back was partially to him. He was sitting right next to her but he thought he would have been closer to her if he had stayed at home.

“I’ll be here every second week for two months to answer questions and help you and the little ones make choices that will help with positive transition,” Roxy finished, resting her hands on her stomach.

She waited for questions.

There was silence. Brian Enan stood, raising his hand from the back of the room. Roxy’s eyes widened into a smile as she gestured open-handed towards him.

“My name is Brian Enan. I am president of The Henrithvale Grower’s Association and president of the Henrithvale Football Club.”

Brian’s voice often changed in tone when he spoke to women. It hovered somewhere between impatient and outraged, but Vic doubted he was aware of it. Roxy didn’t seem to notice. She nodded as Brian spoke.

“As someone who has lived in Henrithvale his entire life, someone who attended this very school, as did my father and his father before him, the school closure comes as quite a shock.”

“School transitions are often difficult on grandparents and parents as well as children,” she said ruefully.
“Well, I can assure you that I don’t fall into any of those categories,” Brian said. “My point is this: where was the community consultation? There needs to be a review process in place.” There were murmurings around the room that Brian seemed to find encouraging, but Vic had the feeling people just wanted him to be quiet.

“Brian, I understand your feelings of confusion…”

“There is no confusion here, young lady.” His chin jutted out a little. “There is a fair amount of anger, but tell me this, as this town fights for its very survival against a hostile government…”

“Brian, these are not questions I can answer.” Her voice had a determination about it that made Vic pay attention.

Brian adjusted the waist of his pants.

“My role is to assist with transitions.”

“You’re here, you’re from the department, you answer the questions!” Brian demanded.

Anthony stepped forward, nervously raising his hands to quell Brian’s questioning.

“The decision to close a school is never taken lightly,” he said.

“Do you have any idea, fella, how long this school has been here?” Whenever Brian called someone “fella” it meant he was angry. It was his way of swearing.

“The historic or sentimental value of a school is not part of the criteria for assessing its short term or long term viability.” Anthony, Vic thought, had said these kind of things before. “In any case our role is not as debaters or messengers between you and the department, our role is to assist parents and care providers…”
“You reckon you can bus kids an hour and a half to Kerang and an hour and a half back,” Vic found himself cutting in. “That’s a long transition.” Some voices offered support, but Jane remained very still next to him.

“Obviously that is not ideal and we would be looking to assist you in finding alternate arrangements,” Anthony answered quickly.

“What does that mean?” a different voice asked.

“There isn’t a one-size-fits-all solution. We can certainly work through that with you today on an individual basis.”

There were more questions but there was no more struggle. Forms and booklets were handed out, and some parents gathered around Roxy and Anthony for their chance to be given specific guidance. The windows had fogged over and the outside world seemed to have disappeared.

Vic saw that Jane’s outrage from the night before was gone. He avoided looking at her as she sat quietly next to him. Instead he focussed on Brian, looking flustered, waiting among those lined up to speak to Roxy and Anthony. He had an unexpected urge to stand next to him, but Jane suddenly pulled at his arm. They went outside where the rain had stopped. Jane was clutching at an information booklet. Vic felt like Jane’s mind was more than made up now. She would, he thought, be resolute and there would be no compromise; and there was, for Vic, the edge of something unbearable, reminding him that he would never win.

“I’m going to drop in and have a coffee with June,” she said brushing her fingers through her hair.

“Yeah.” There was a line of ants moving across the wall above the school’s main entrance, which caught Vic’s eye. “I’ll see how Edna is,” he added absently.
“We can talk later.” Vic knew that she was looking directly at him but he did not want to look at her.

He headed to the ute and drove straight into town, stopping outside the general store. There was a handwritten ‘closed’ sign taped to the front window. As he sat in the ute, Herbert appeared at the front door of the shop. Edna, supported by Lily, came after him. She looked small, shrunken. As Herbert locked up the store, Lily and Edna shuffled towards their car, Lily helping Edna into the backseat.

Vic got out of the ute, leaving his door open, and approached the car.

Edna was sitting on the backseat, entombed in blankets, with only her head and hands showing. There were bags and boxes packed around her.

“You headin’ out for the day, Ed?”

Edna looked at him with her pale eyes and smiled. “You’d make your mother proud, you would.” She forced the words out, and her breath stank of decay. Vic saw that she wanted to say more. Her chin poked forward, trying to bring the words up, but there wasn’t the air, wasn’t the strength.

“It’s alright, Ed.” He smiled. “You’ll be alright.” He remembered her arm around his shoulders in the months after his mother’s death. He remembered her washing his clothes and the money she would slip into his pocket. She had said very little during this time, but he knew she was there. He wanted to thank her for her love, for her kindness, but there didn’t seem to be any way he could do that.

“Dad’s given me your number, and here is my card,” Lily said behind him. Vic stood up and took the card from Lily. She seemed relaxed, as if moving her parents out of their town was an everyday event.

Herbert came closer and put his arms gently around Vic.

“Here he is. Good lad, good lad.”
Vic felt small, like he did when he heard John on a rant, when he heard the sounds of things break and his mother’s voice scared and calling at John to stop. These things did not die. He wanted to go home, hide in the wardrobe and wait for the morning when the day would start anew.

Lily helped Herbert into the car and closed his door. Vic carefully closed Edna’s door. Then he stepped away from the car and let it go. He got into the ute and started driving back home. He was no more than a hundred metres out of town when he pulled over to the side of the road and vomited three times, dry retching into the grass until his stomach cramped. When he looked up he saw that the sky was turbulent and immense, and he felt that it would always loom over him.
When Vic returned home he had a strong coffee. He wanted to put down some fertilizer for the trees. He had called Dave the night before and organised a time to meet him at the gate with his tractor. There had been so many times after his mother’s death that he stayed a night or two with Herbert and Edna. He would go into the shop after school, sometimes instead of school, and Herbert would find him something to do: take inventory, stack shelves, clear out the back shed and so on. Vic never asked to stay. It was always Edna who would say something like, “Stop in here tonight, better that way.” Vic never spoke to John about it. Edna told him not to worry, that she would take care of it. He could not recall having ever seen Herbert or Edna speak directly to John, and they only spoke of him to Vic in passing. Everything was about the farm, the weather, the football club or events and people around Henrithvale. Vic wondered what he actually knew of them and what it meant that they had left as they did.

He wondered if Jane knew about Herbert and Edna, if it was just something else that told her the town was finished. He didn’t want to think about it, there was nothing that could be done now. He still had the trees.

When Vic opened the back door William Mulholland was waiting for him, resplendent in his grey suit.

There was a crispness in the way he dressed; no button or thread was unaccounted for. His hair, a darker grey than his suit, was neatly parted on the left
side of his head, and his shoes, a polished black, seemed as if they were made of glass.

“Top of the morning to you, Vic.” His voice had a joyful enthusiasm and he held up his palms. “I come in peace, I come in peace.”

Vic felt as if he were cornered on the back steps. He had a sense the desperado was near, not just watching but on the verge of acting, and Vic was not certain against whom he would act.

Mulholland took a hesitant step forward. “The way we last parted was not in the best of spirits and I’ve come to make amends.”

“I’m busy,” Vic said.

“No doubt you are, and aren’t we all in some way or another.”

Vic would need to walk around him to get to the machinery shed where he’d left the ute.

“But just a moment, Vic, is all I ask, just a brief moment of your time.” There was something menacing around Mulholland’s words. Vic knew he should be cautious.

“The ute’s in the shed.” Vic pointed behind Mulholland. “I need to load it and get to work: that’s all the time you’ve got.” He veered around Mulholland and walked at a quick pace towards the shed.

“You’re a hard man, Vic, I’ll give you that.” Mulholland was beside him. He used his long-handled umbrella as a walking stick. “No doubt you have to be. However, on this occasion it’s not in your best interests.”

Vic entered the shed and put on the rigging gloves he had left on top of the fertilizer bags. The stench of mice had subsided with the clearing skies. He started loading the fertilizer bags into the back of the ute. They were stacked five high against
the shed wall. He wriggled a bag forward, wrapped his arms around it and scuttled over to the ute where he heaved the bag on to the ute’s tray. Certified organic, but it still smelled like shit.

“I won’t lie to you, Vic, like some would, and tell you that I am only thinking of you. I’m not. There is plenty in this for me too.”

Vic dropped another bag of fertilizer into the back of the ute with a thud and then put his hands on his hips.

“If there wasn’t, you wouldn’t be here,” Vic responded as he crossed back to the fertilizer bags.

“Though it’s not the money that I care for.” Mulholland smiled and gestured with a sweep of his left arm to the world outside the shed. “What I want you to see, Vic, is that what is best for me is also what is best for you, and most importantly best for your little girls.”

Vic lifted another bag of fertilizer into the ute.

“And I should just believe you, should I?” Vic shook his head.

Mulholland stepped away from the ute as Vic dropped the last bag of fertilizer on the tray, expelling a great puff of residue into the air. Mulholland leaned gently on his umbrella and continued.

“You’ve got nothing to bargain with: no school, no football club. Don’t sink with the ship, there’s no dignity in it.”

Vic lifted the draw bar of the two-wheeled fertiliser spreader and shuffled backwards, pulling the spreader towards the ute and hitching it to the tow bar. He took off his gloves and tossed them through the ute’s open window and onto the passenger seat.
“You know how things will work out?” Vic challenged him. “What’ll happen if we sell and what’ll happen if we don’t sell?”

“I can all but guarantee it, Vic.”

“I need to get to work,” Vic said.

Mulholland extended his hand. Vic hesitated a moment, stepped forward and then clasped it in his own.

“So be it, Vic. So be it. Go on then, take care of those precious apples. I’ll be seeing you.” Mulholland smiled.

Vic reversed the ute out of the machinery shed and headed towards the orchard. Mulholland might have watched him go, but Vic did not look back.

He parked the ute near the gate that connected his property to Dave’s, just near the edge of the orchard, and waited in the cab. Dave would be there soon enough with his tractor. Suddenly the door was jerked open. He fell awkwardly out of the cab and landed on the muddy ground. He turned around and expected to hear Dave’s laugh, but it was the desperado.

“I seen it an’ I don’t believe it.” The desperado reached down and pulled Vic to his feet by the lapels of his shirt. “Jus’ what you playin’ at?” The desperado was agitated; his hands were monstrous, and they held Vic in place.

“Get your hands off me.” Vic struggled to break free from the grip but he couldn’t get any leverage. His feet were barely touching the ground. He could see the underside of the desperado’s hat and the dark sweat stains that marked it. The desperado shoved him back against the car and then stepped away from him. Vic felt the desperado’s eyes making an assessment, measuring the fight Vic had in him.

“That thing you was talkin’ to, all cordial, that’s jus’ the thing that has been hauntin’ you.” The desperado spat on the ground and stared at Vic.
“Mulholland?” Vic said softly.

“It don’t matter none what his name is. I seen him a hun’red times before. You can’t see that? You can’t see what he is?” The desperado’s eyes narrowed and he turned his head slightly to the left.

“It doesn’t matter. He’s right,” Vic spat out.

“The hell he is!” The desperado took a half-step backwards so that his left foot was still forward but his weight was on his right leg. His hands bawled into each other.

“There isn’t much to choose from in case you haven’t noticed.” Vic said, ready to crouch down into a ball to protect himself. “Stay here alone and starve, or sell up and go with Jane.”

“You go and there ain’t no comin’ back.”

“Fuck it!” Vic turned and pounded his fists down on the bonnet of the ute. The desperado walked up behind Vic and put his right hand on Vic’s left shoulder.

“You’re waitin’ for somethin’ ain’t gonna come. Ain’t nothin’ or no one gonna save you, but you. ‘Bout time you made a stand.” the desperado quietly urged.

Vic buried his head in his hands, felt the desperado’s hand fall away from his shoulder and looked up to see the desperado turn away and walk in amongst the apple trees.

“Fuck!” Vic pounded his palms down on the bonnet of the ute.

Dave was almost alongside him before Vic heard the tractor. Vic spun around wildly. Dave turned off the engine.

“Don’t reckon that’ll do it. Give it a big fuckin’ kick, that’ll get it done.” He looked bemused.

Vic felt his face flush.
Dave leaned back in his seat and scratched at the back of his neck. “Shit times these. Can’t do a fuckin’ thing that works.”

Vic scanned the landscape and saw the desperado among the trees. He had raised his hands to his mouth and was calling to Vic, but Vic could not make out what he was saying and his words were lost, heard only by the trees.

Vic and Dave worked the orchard for just on three hours before the rain settled in and Dave took the spreader back to the machinery shed and headed home. Vic unloaded the remaining bags of fertiliser and drove the ute to the far end of the orchard. He didn’t want to see Jane, didn’t want to hear her views on the meeting. The thought that Herbert and Edna were gone and might not be back seemed as improbable as losing the football club or closing the school or moving to Bendigo. He felt tired and the drum of the rain on the ute lulled him to sleep. When he woke up the light had nearly faded from the day and the desperado was in the ute, sitting in the passenger seat. Vic let out a shock of air when he saw him.

“Sleep sound as a newborn.” The desperado shook his head. “Likely get you killed one day.”

The rain had stopped but cold air had settled in the ute around Vic’s legs. He wanted to move, to rub at his legs but he wasn’t sure what the desperado would do. He seemed poised on the verge of something terrifying.

“All this thinkin’ of stayin’ or goin’ don’t make no sense.” The desperado looked out the window to where the hills squatted in the distance. “Man orta know.”

“You should go,” Vic heard himself say and gestured with his head towards the dark hills. He felt, suddenly and oddly, that it was the desperado who was in danger. The recognition of this was on his face, and the desperado, Vic saw, understood it too.
He looked up at Vic, and Vic saw the green of his eyes flecked with brown and they seemed younger, much younger than he was, as if the eyes did not belong to him at all. He pushed open the door and got out. Vic watched him walk towards the settling darkness until he merged into it and Vic could not distinguish one from the other.
Vic parked the ute next to the grandstand. It was the night before he would play the most important game of his life. He had to try and focus on this. Tomorrow, he would take a stand. He would do something he had wanted to do his whole life, something he thought had passed him by.

If his mother was here she would reassure him. He thought about how he used to feel watching John play in a Grand Final. He remembered how, if Henrithvale had the ascendancy, he would not move lest he disturb some cosmic force that had bestowed favour onto the Henrithvale team. In close games he would rock and then suddenly explode with joy or despair. The world around him disappeared; it was always just him and the game.

Vic wandered down into the clubrooms. They had been revived. There were balloons and streamers hanging down from the roof, and Brian had set out all the premiership cups that Henrithvale had ever won. Next to each cup was a picture of the winning team and yellowing scrapbooks of newspaper articles. Those in the photos were forever bound to the cup they had won and to each other. As Vic saw the players enter the room and pause before the collection, as he had done, he knew that this was something they wanted too.

After a while Brian moved amongst the players. His voice, when he spoke, was loud and determined.

“Get changed and get ready.”
Vic sat down on the bench that lined the wall and undressed. He took his time to find the old shorts, the old jumper. He didn’t want to rush anything, didn’t want anything to pass by so quickly that in days or years to come he might not be able to recall this training session. He watched the faces of those around him and listened to their clear voices.

When they were ready, Brian had them sit on the bench or on the floor. They had to bunch in together so closely that there seemed to be fewer of them than there actually were. Then Brian took a chair, placed it in front of them and leaned against it as he spoke.

“Tonight,” he said, so loudly that he had to take in more air, “won’t be a long session. We’ll do the drills that have us in our first Grand Final in more than twenty years.” He paused to let the players absorb the idea of it.

“On these tables,” he gestured to the trophies and memorabilia, “are the things this club has earned and the names of those that have earned them. These are men who didn’t give in”—his voice started to build—“men who worked for each other, worked for their mates. Now it’s your turn.” He pointed at the players, at Dave, at Vic, at the others who had all seen their fathers and grandfathers achieve such greatness. “It’s time for everyone here to add their names to the list!”

He hobbled over to the table and picked up a premiership cup. “You don’t get this for trying. You don’t get this crossing your fingers and hoping it all works out. You get this because you’re willing to do more than the bloke on the other team is willing to do. You run harder, tackle harder and give more.”

Vic wanted the game to start now. He felt as if he could run straight through the walls and kick the ball a hundred metres.
“Let’s go!” Brian waved his right hand towards the door and the players surged towards it, pushing each other down the narrow hallway and out into the cold air.

The ground was washed in light. Vic jogged slow laps with his team mates in silence, as if in supplication. Brian wanted to keep the training session short; he instructed them to take it easy, to save it for the match. Vic could feel the hesitation in the playing group. He could sense the energy but he also knew that nobody wanted to commit to do anything that might strain a muscle or tear a ligament. They were so close now. It might be the last time that Henrithvale would ever field a team.

They trained for forty-five minutes, but it seemed to Vic little more than moments. Afterwards, before anyone could shower, Brian assembled the team in the clubrooms and dragged over his chalkboard. Standing next to it, he talked through their game plan. It was nothing new, only now it all seemed to have significance. He pointed at players, went over targets and transitions, where to put the ball, how the forwards would set up and how the backs would set up. There were no questions or jokes from the players— not even Dave.

At the end of it Brian seemed more exhausted than the players. It was as if, Vic thought, he was coming out of a trance. Shaking loose a version of himself he was unaware of, he pulled over a chair so that he was close to the group and sat down. The players sat down around him. When Brian began to speak it reminded Vic of being very young and hearing a teacher read some fantastical tale to the class on a rainy day.

“What I saw out there tonight was not passable. I would go as far to say it wouldn’t win us a single game, let alone a Grand Final.” Brian clasped his reddish hands together, looking around at the players. “Never mind. It has been a difficult few days and nowhere feels it more than a football club.”
Vic felt like Brian had something more to say. His hands gripped the edges of the bench and he felt as if he had been winded, like he needed to vomit. Something was coming, something that he needed to be away from.

“Well, I have some news, a letter received this morning.” Brian took the folded envelope out of his back pocket and, without the usual pause, began reading.

“Dear Mr Enan, your application for a review pertaining to the ongoing viability of the Western Football League has concluded. The independent body charged with the review will inform you of its finding in coming weeks.” He stopped reading with, “and on it goes.” He folded the letter and stuffed it back into his pocket.

Nobody moved. The moment seemed tenuous.

“I do, however,” Brian raised his voice, “have it on good authority that the Western Football League will continue to function with reduced rounds, a reduced season, and that Henrithvale will continue to be a part of that league.” There was a long silence as if the words had to be carefully deciphered before they could be understood. Then Vic looked around in relief. The others were smiling and even laughing. Dave, sitting next to him on the bench, pushed playfully into him.

“Good on ya, Brian!” came a call and others joined in. There was clapping but Brian raised his hands and shook his head.

“Now, now,” Brian smiled, using the back of the chair as a brace to get to his feet, “that’s not all. It is important that no one leaves before we have a further discussion on a matter unrelated to football but of vital importance to Henrithvale.”

Vic moved off to the showers with the other players, where the stink of steam, soap and sweat clung to the walls. He was the last one out of the showers, the team giving him a loud cheer as he finally emerged, dressed again in his everyday clothes, carrying a wet towel and dirty shorts.
Brian waited until he sat down on the bench and then he started to speak.

“This isn’t news that is hot off the press but the Henrithvale Consolidated School will be closing at the end of the year, or so says the Department of Education.”

He took in a deep breath and spoke in an uncharacteristically quiet voice as if delivering difficult news. “I know a number of you have children at the school, have had children at the school. This is something I am hesitant to say, but it needs to be said. I have been told, informally so, in my role as President of the Henrithvale Grower’s Association that the government will rescind its demand for the compulsory requisition of irrigation leases.”

Vic looked at those around him and they stared back with equal amounts of uncertainty.

“Say that again, Brian?” Dave said, stunned, as he scratched at the side of his head.

“Don’t get ahead of yourselves, this situation might just be temporary, and I have not heard anything else,” Brian said, “but I say this to you now because it shows what people like us, people those in Canberra think can be forgotten about, can achieve when we stick together and work hard. I intend to fight for the school in the same way.”

A great cheer rose up around Vic. The players were standing and grabbing hold of each other’s forearms. Vic slumped onto the bench, clasping at his knees to stop himself falling over. He let out a noise that was part laugh and part cry. Next to him Dave had his arms folded tightly across his chest, in the way Vic remembered from when they were boys and he wanted to stop himself from crying.
Brian hastily stretched out his arms to subdue the group, but could not. Vic asked Brian to repeat his statement as did others and each time Brian seemed to emphasise more and more the uncertainty of the news.

“We’ve gone from lost the fuckin’ town and the club to everything’s right in the space of a few days.” Dave stood up, picked up his bag and walked towards the door. “Fuck me. I’ll have a fuckin’ stroke.” Vic knew Dave could not contain the emotion of the news and had gone to be alone. Vic watched him leave and despite the high mood Brian went about packing equipment away. If the school remained, if some version of it could hold on for a few more years, he thought, then he could put together a good reason for Jane and the girls to stay in Henrithvale. Vic helped Brian carry footballs and lock the clubrooms. When he walked out to the ute it was the only vehicle in the car park, waiting patiently and alone. He wanted to go back into the clubrooms, he wanted John to know that he too could win a premiership, could be a farmer; and if he did these things then nothing John had ever said to him would be true anymore.

When Vic got home from football training the girls were already in bed, and Jane was watching TV. He could smell traces of a sandalwood candle that Jane said helped her relax. He stood in the doorway between the kitchen and the lounge room and watched Jane as she roamed the four channels on the TV. He was smiling; he couldn’t help it. The football club would be okay; there would be another chance.

She seemed more surprised by his grin than by his sudden entrance.

“What are you so happy about?” she asked, turning her attention back to the TV and flicking from channel to channel.
“Brian reckons we’ll be alright. He says the GW DFA will reverse its decision on appeal and let the league stay.” He stepped onto the worn lounge room carpet that had been in the house longer than he had.

“That’s good news, Vic.” She half-smiled and switched off the TV.

He sat down on the couch, relaxing back into it and putting his hands behind his head. In the far corner of the room there was a dark stain on the carpet from where, every December, the Christmas tree would be placed. It had been his mother’s favourite time of the year. Vic wanted to tell her about what had happened. He wanted to tell Jane too.

“Brian reckons there won’t be anyone forced to sell. He reckons the government will let us keep our leases.”

He looked across at her but she didn’t react.

“Vic?” She turned to face him. “Vic, I don’t know what we’re going to do.” The words seemed too big for her mouth and difficult to push out. “I want to make a decision with you.”

He looked at her and had to think for a moment what it might be that was upsetting her.

“Do about what?” he asked slowly, saying the words even as he knew just what she meant.

“Us, Vic. Us.”

The words had a solidifying effect on the muscles in his back and across his shoulders. His arms came down from behind his head and folded across his chest.

“All you talk about is the football club, the farm and how we’re not going to sell.”
He moved to the edge of the couch. It didn’t matter now if the irrigation leases stayed or went. He had to think for a long time before he answered.

“Jane, when you came out here you knew you were comin’ to a farm. Nothin’s changed.”

“I have, Vic, I’ve changed!” Jane yelled, and then Vic felt her work to calm herself. “When we got married I had no idea what I wanted to do.”

“Thanks,” he scoffed.

“You know what I mean.”

“So now you do know what you wanna do?” He asked, keeping his eyes on the carpet.

“No, but I’ve had enough of this. We’ve got a chance to get out, start somewhere else…”

“You mean you’ve got a chance.”

“You’re a wonderful father,” Jane continued. “Our girls adore you. They’re always asking when you’ll be home, when you’ll come in. They don’t see enough of you.”

Vic felt like he used to as a child when he got an end-of-term report. The reports always started off the same: “Vic is a hardworking and determined student” or “Vic is a caring and respectful student.” However, when it came down to a grade he was always near the bottom of the class. A nice kid who tried hard, was enthusiastic and determined, but couldn’t quite get there.

“So that’s it then?” He looked at the blank TV screen and saw a reflection of himself sitting alone.

“If you want this marriage then you should do something about it,” Jane said.

“Stop putting it back on me.”
He wondered how long she had been preparing for this conversation. He wondered how many times she had played it over in her head, anticipating any weaknesses in his predictable arguments.

“If you want this family to work,” she continued, “then meet me half way.”

She had him cornered.

He looked at her. He couldn’t answer, there was nothing to say. He stared at the blank TV screen until he heard her get up and go into the bedroom and close the door.

He turned Jane’s words over in his head as he watched the blank screen, looking for a way out. He wondered if all he was ever doing was passing time, that life was only ever a series of distractions. The impermanence of words and beliefs and promises daunted him.
Vic woke up hours before sunrise from a dreamless sleep and stared at the darkness. His thoughts drifted to the vegetable garden that he had planted with his mother when he was seven or eight. He remembered toiling the earth, digging in fertilizer and planting seeds for tomatoes, basil, beetroot and corn. His mother explained that from the seed would emerge the beginnings of the plant; that it would push its way up through the earth to find the sunlight. Every morning for the next week he woke up with a nervous energy and went outside to see if there were the beginnings of something, if the seed had taken. Once a seed had shown itself, he measured the growth every day.

Yet there were some seeds that never sprouted. His mother had told him that sometimes a seed just didn’t have life in it, but he didn’t think that was true. He had read since that some seeds can be dormant for years or decades; they wait until the right conditions and then life comes reaching up out of the ground.

When the sun came up he got out of bed and saw that the sky was high and cloudless. He was ready to drive to the ground, to just sit in the clubrooms alone, to begin absorbing the day. He had five eggs and six sausages for breakfast, drinking three cups of coffee. He packed his bag, then unpacked it, checking over everything before he packed it again. He was pacing in the kitchen when Jane woke up.

“Everything alright?” she asked half-heartedly, shuffling through the kitchen in worn pink slippers.
“Might head down to the ground,” he said and picked up his bag, wondering if he should check it over one more time just in case he had missed something.

She looked at the clock above the oven. “Now? Bit early don’t you think?”

He picked up the bag and made his way quickly to the ute. He had this nagging feeling that the ground was no longer fifteen minutes away. He reversed the ute out of the carport and knocked over the rubbish bin. He thought about leaving it but decided that it could be a bad omen, so he got out and straightened it before driving cautiously towards the road.

When he got into town there were maroon and blue streamers and balloons tied around every telephone pole. He turned onto the gravel driveway that led down to the oval and parked the ute beside the grandstand, where a dozen other cars were already parked. Doc, Dave, the Pattison boy and some others had congregated nearby, having already made the pilgrimage. Vic went through his bag one last time, tried to get out of the cabin before he had taken off his seatbelt, and then approached the group.

“A bit fuckin’ late,” Dave smirked. He was clean shaved, his hair neatly combed.

“Couldn’t sleep.”

“You are not alone there,” Doc smiled. In the still, chilly morning their breath came out in white puffs

“Where’s Brian?” Vic asked.

“His car is here, but I haven’t seen him yet.” Doc was leaning against the red bricks of the Henrithvale Town Stand.

“Seen the paper?” Dave handed Vic a copy of *The Melbourne Advertiser*. The headline read: “Dam Damned-Towns Saved.”
“Read the fuckin’ fine print on page five,” Dave added. He was no longer smiling. Vic put his bag down and turned the awkward broadsheet to page five.

“Here.” Dave tapped on the article with his finger. “Read that.”

Vic read out loud:

“Although the requisition of water leases from farmers in the Henrithvale district will no longer be compulsory, Minister for the Environment, Warren Evans, said the Government was still determined to return water to the Red River catchment and improve the health of the river system. “It is crucial to the long term survival of rural Victoria that there be an available and dependable flow of water.” Although Evans was non-committal on exactly how this would be achieved without requisition of the irrigation leases he did say, “We are currently reviewing the structure of all existing water leases that draw from the Red River and it may mean a change in the structure of some leases.” It is expected government will announce a reduction in the allocation each farmer receives with allocation to be based on sales quotas and projected sales.”

The article went on but Vic stopped reading.

“Just kill us off slow,” Dave said, shaking his head.

“Well boys,” Doc said, stretching his long arms out so they touched the shoulders of those around him. “We’ve got a football game to win.”

“Fuckin oath.” Dave’s voice was strong.

Vic folded the paper and handed it back to Dave. Brian Enan emerged from behind the corner of the stand. He looked hunched, tired and surprised to see so many players here so early. His neck had red blotches of shaving rash and the scent of cologne long past its date of expiry surrounded him.
“The protocol, for those of you who have trouble remembering it, is that players arrive an hour before the game. By my watch,” he didn’t take his eyes off the group, “there is still the better part of six hours before the first bounce.”

“No one could sleep, Brian.” Doc smiled. Brian looked perplexed.

“I encourage you all to go home and sleep for a few hours lest you are found wanting at game’s end.” He put his hands on his waist and thought for a moment. “Alternatively there is plenty to be done here, and those of you wanting to occupy your time need look no further than me for guidance.”

Doc went to nap in his car, while the Pattison boys and others sat aimlessly in the stand, looking as if the game had already been played and they had arrived too late to do anything but mourn its passing. Vic and Dave painted lines on the oval, tracing the faded white marks from the previous weeks. The air was tinged with spring and the grass felt fresh and easy under foot. Brian appeared every so often to make sure Vic and Dave were performing the task in a way he felt appropriate, but Vic noted that there was something heavy about his movements.

“Reckon the old Clock’ll manage?” Dave asked, with a nod of his head at Brian’s figure retreating towards the stand.

“He’s the only one that’s done it before,” Vic said, keeping his eyes down to make sure the lines were perfect.

Gradually other people began to arrive: to set up the tuck shop, to organise parking, to deliver food and drink. As Vic and Dave completed their lines, Brian called at them to go down into the clubrooms. There were still just under two hours before the game was to start, but most of the team had already arrived and were in their gear; just seeing others in the colours of the Maroons made Vic feel like he was being left behind. He immediately got changed.
While other players were getting strapped and rubbed down, Vic sat on the bench and held a football between his hands. It was the same spot he always sat in, and he remembered how for so many years he had sat, in the same spot and wanted the same things. He felt as if all those different versions of himself from all those different seasons were looking at him and saying, “You are the one. You are here because of us and you must do this for all of us.”

When the desire to start the game became too much Vic started to pace, deliberately bumping into his team mates, getting a feel for the game, reassuring them and at the same time being reassured. Above, he could hear the stand filling, the noise drifting down into the rooms. He kept pacing, telling himself that there was nothing else to think about now, just this moment, just this game. He told himself he owed it to the club, to his mother, to Dave, to his team mates, but most importantly he owed to himself. He told himself he deserved it.

When there was less than fifteen minutes to the start of the game, Brian came into the rooms and called the players together. Peter Weston, the central umpire for the game, came in to the clubrooms to wish them luck and Vic could see how sombre he was. No doubt, Vic thought, he wanted to be in a Henrithvale jumper. Brian gathered the players around him. Vic bunched in with them, their arms instinctively finding each other and pulling each other closer.

“Now, despite what you might think,” Brian began, “despite what you might well be expecting, this isn’t the time for grandiose words that stir up the emotions.” Brian removed his glasses and brushed his hair across his forehead. “Some of you may well know that I’ve done this a few times, as player and coach, and I can tell you that getting yourself all worked up is not the way to go about it. You’ve got a job, we’ve got a job, we’re going to finish what we’ve started.”
“Those blokes next door,” he pointed in the direction of the opposition change rooms, “they are thinking the thing same as you. In a few minutes we’ll go out on the ground, warm up, get a feel for the ball, look and listen to the crowd. No doubt many of you will have never played in front of a crowd of this size, but I want you to switch it off.”

Brian walked away from them, lifting the square chalkboard off the wall. As he began to go over starting positions and what was expected, Vic could feel and then hear the blood in the veins of those around him; the tremors in their arms and legs as their hearts beat faster.

“Alright, let’s go,” Brian said, leading Vic and the other players down to the race.

Vic bunched up close behind Doc in the race, running on the spot. It was dark, the light at the end of the tunnel obscured by the players in front of him. The smell of liniment seeped into his nostrils, and he noticed his arms were shaking as if they held some great weight. As he began to move down the race, streaks of light cut through the darkness and a boundless roll of noise reverberated so loudly that it came through the brick walls, circled behind him and pushed him forwards. He could not feel his legs, but he knew that they were still moving, and then he breached the tunnel and came out into the day. The noise propelled him further so that he felt nothing but the sound.

As he touched the field he turned and saw that the Henrithvale Town Stand was full. Supporters began singing the Maroon’s theme song. Vic felt as if he could not take in enough air.

“Fuck me,” he heard Dave gasp.
Brian’s voice was vague and distant, calling on the players to stretch and move the balls through a warmup rotation. Players fumbled and miskicked, and Brian again yelled at them to calm down and focus. A section of the crowd cheered as the Northern Waters team came out onto the ground. They were relatively new to the league, having joined in 1960 when the town, which had thrived on gold during the nineteenth century and then all but disappeared in the Great Depression, was reborn with new mines in the post-World War II era. They wore a black jumper with a yellow sash running from top left to bottom right. They had been the dominant force in the league in recent years, but this year they were weak with bigger teams having poached their better players.

Vic stretched his legs as the feeling in them returned and then Brian’s voice became clearer.

“In! In!” Brian moved his arms as if he were scooping the players up, drawing them towards him. “Listen! Those blokes over there,” he pointed in the direction of the Northern Waters Tigers, “they’ve done this before. They’ll come out hard. Keep your feet, don’t drop your head and your time will come.” His glasses were off again and he looked at Vic and at each of the other players, right into their eyes.

Brian led the players over to the area of the ground in front of the Henrithvale Town Stand. They stood in a line, shoulder to shoulder, facing the Northern Waters Tigers as a tired version of the Australian national anthem sounded through the public address system. The crowd was silent through the first verse and into the chorus, but then no longer willing to wait, erupted into cheers and sounded car horns. Vic wouldn’t have known the song was finished if it hadn’t been for the players around him moving into a huddle.
Dave ran away from the group and into the centre to meet with Peter Weston, and the Captain of the Northern Waters Tigers. Vic watched as they shook hands and Peter Weston flipped a coin in the air. It landed and then Dave pointed towards the end of the ground closest to the Royal Mail Hotel. The crowd bellowed its approval, as Dave jogged back to the huddle and thrust himself into the middle.

“Our whole fuckin’ lives we’ve been waitin’ for this.” He sounded angry, cheated and Vic felt it too. “Let’s fuckin’ do it. C’mon.” The players broke from the huddle and ran to position, crossing in front of and behind the Northern Waters players.

Vic found his way to the forward pocket and his opponent, a tall solid man, immediately pushed his elbow into Vic’s ribs.

“You’re fucked,” the man said softly with his head down, his black hair neatly parted on one side. Vic pushed him away and jogged forward.

The siren sounded. Peter Weston blew his whistle, held the ball in the air, and the game began.

The ball slammed down into the ground and bounced high and straight. It held for a moment against the blue of the sky and was then smothered by a crash of players and the deafening noise from the stand. Vic couldn’t make out what was happening. Then he heard the whistle and saw a Tigers player emerge with the free kick. Henrithvale players scattered to fill up space on the ground, but the Tigers player was precise and hit a tall leading forward who had cut his way through the congestion. The Tigers player took his time, walked in and kicked the first goal of the game. Tigers players ran from all over the ground to congratulate the forward, pushing and knocking into Henrithvale players as they went.
The ball was bounced again and Dave quickly emerged from the pack, looking for a forward option, but before he could kick he was run down from behind and tackled. The Tigers player was rewarded with a free kick and pushed the ball across to the open space on the other side of the ground. The Tigers had a loose player; he picked up the ball, took a single bounce and easily kicked the second goal of the game. Tigers players again celebrated.

Vic jogged nervously around. Panic was coming to life inside him. The game was moving too fast; Henrithvale couldn’t keep up. The ball bounced again and this time Adam Pattison jumped over the top of the Tigers ruckman, punching the ball twenty metres towards the Henrithvale goal. Vic led out wide creating room for Doc, but Dean Pattison scooped up the ball and was driven into the ground earning a free kick. Dave pulled the offending Tigers player off Dean and was then knocked to the ground by another Tigers player. Peter Weston blew his whistle.

“I warned you before the game,” he said. “Fifty metre penalty.”

It put Dean right in front of goal, and he kicked Henrithvale’s first. The Henrithvale players surrounded him. Vic grasped Dean’s shoulders. He longed to touch the ball, just for a moment, but there was not the chance.

The ball was taken back to the centre for another bounce. The pace of the game slowed so that it became a struggle between half-back lines, each preventing the ball from finding its way into the hands of the opposition forwards. Vic could sense the strain on the Henrithvale players and soon their backline could not clear the ball past the centre. The Tigers pushed harder, their tackling was relentless and soon Henrithvale had conceded three more goals. Vic still hadn’t touched the ball. The Tigers pressed forward again, but the siren sounded to end the quarter.
The Henrithvale players made their way to the quarter time huddle. As Vic ran in he could hear the loud voices of the Tigers players, urging each other on. The stand sounded like the chorus from some ancient play, voicing the hopes and doubts of the team.

Brian had the players gather in close.

“The first quarter is gone, over and done with, but this second quarter belongs to us. Too often we drop our heads and don’t take the risks we need to take.” Vic wasn’t even sweating. “Listen to me. Listen!” Brian’s voice exploded in their faces. “You won’t win this game if you don’t try. Take a stand, and if you’re going to lose, then go down swinging.”

Vic could feel the heat and sweat on those that brushed against him, but his skin felt cold.

Brian started to shift players around. Vic felt it coming. Brian took Adam Pattison out of the ruck and put Dean in so that he could use his body to slow the Tigers ruck. Adam Pattison went to centre-half back, and Doc went to full-forward. Brian looked at Vic then he reached forward and grabbed him by the neck of his jumper, pulling him forward so that he lost balance.

“Get your hands on the ball!” He yelled and shoved Vic away.

Vic was too stunned to respond. The players from both teams ran back to position. The quarter started and the Tigers cleared the ball with a succession of quick handpasses and kicked a goal inside thirty seconds. The voices of the Tigers players changed—their voices spoke of an inevitability.

Vic’s opponent clapped his hands.

“Let’s smash ‘em, Tiges,” he called out to his team mates, and the cry echoed around the ground.
Vic felt the need to get away, the desire to start the whole thing over again. He had to do something. He sprinted up to the wing as Peter Weston bounced the ball, and then he ran head down into the huddle of players who were trying to work the ball to an advantage. The huddle caved in and Dave emerged, running horizontal to the goals. He took one bounce, but the defenders stayed off him, trying to corral him instead. Dave stopped, shuffled backwards and put the ball up high. Doc caught it and slotted through Henrithvale’s second goal.

Dave stopped next to Vic as he ran back to the centre.

“What the fuck were ya doin’? Ya just about killed me.” Vic could not answer. Dave looked at him, “Do it again.”

Vic returned to the wing, his opponent alongside him, keeping his forearm against Vic’s shoulder. As soon as the ball hit the ground Vic ran straight at the pack of players again, but stopped short, pivoting so that he was suddenly behind his opponent. From there he shoved him in the back as hard as he could straight into the oncoming melee. Neither of the umpires saw it. Vic’s opponent picked himself up, ran back to Vic and pushed an open hand into his face. Peter Weston blew his whistle, and Vic won a free kick. There was no time to think. He kicked the ball across the ground to where Adam Pattison had run into space. Adam marked the ball, took two steps and kicked a fifty-five metre drop-punt goal.

“Yes!” Vic called out and punched his fist into the air. He felt himself, like the other Henrithvale players, growing taller, stronger.

“Now or fuckin’ never!” Dave screamed at Vic and Doc as he ran back to the centre.

Henrithvale started to grind their way back into the game, kicking two more goals and holding the Tigers to four points. At half-time Henrithvale were only ten
points behind and Vic knew that they would not break. The players jogged off the
ground towards the clubrooms, the crowd offering an incantation to guide the team home.

In the clubrooms Vic drank some water, stretched and chewed on sugar lollies. He and the other players called to each other, offering encouragement and belief. Brian moved among them, clapping his hands. Vic knew he would let them rest for a moment and enjoy what they had done.

Vic’s head was clear. He understood what it was he had to do; find the ball, move the ball forward, sacrifice for the team.

Brian pulled the players in so that they were around him, almost standing over him like a fortress.

“They’ve thrown everything at us and you know what? You know what? It wasn’t enough!” Vic called encouragement to his team mates and heard it given back. “Now we’re going to give them everything we’ve got and they don’t have a chance. Not a chance!”

As the players took to the field the crowd greeted them with fanatical, hoarse noise. Vic could feel it: they would win this quarter, the Tigers would break and the last quarter would be a time to savour.

Vic found himself against a different opponent, a short stocky man around his age. Before the quarter started, he was already pushing into Vic and trying to block his run. When Peter Weston bounced the ball the huddle of players moved in and then suddenly stopped.

Vic moved forward a few steps, was blocked by his opponent but pushed him away, then jogged into the centre square. Peter Weston called for the stretcher, simultaneously separating players from both teams. Adam and Dean Pattison had hold
of the Tigers player who had been Vic’s opponent in the first half, and they in turn had several Tigers players trying to pull them away. As more players joined, it became a scrum.

Dave was on the ground, flat on his back, his arms stiff and his eyes half open. Vic had seen it before and knew that he must have been unconscious before he hit the ground.

Vic came in at the side of the huddle, jumped and grabbed a handful of the hair of the Tigers player the Pattison boys were after. Other Tigers players turned on Vic and the huddle collapsed. Vic threw wild punches without looking, but did not land anything.

Peter Weston’s whistle overcame the wailing of the crowd.

“Separate now or I’ll call the whole fuckin’ game off!”

By the time they had separated, Dave was awake. The trainers were putting a neck brace on him. Adam Pattison was hunched nearby, his hands covering the right side of his face. Doc kneeled beside him and prised away his hands. The right side of Adam’s face was bulging and his eye was swollen shut.

“Awww.” Doc looked up at Vic. “His jaw is broken.”

The trainers, six of them, secured Dave and to gentle applause from the crowd, carried him from the ground. Adam Pattison, leaning on a Tigers trainer, followed behind. The Henrhithvale players gathered together and looked at each other.

“We’ll just keep doin’ what we’re doin’.” Vic’s shaky voice encouraged as he glanced at Brian who was standing near the boundary line waving directions.

Brian sent runners out from the bench to shift players and cover the gaps. Vic’s gaze turned to the blue sky above as it seemed that it was being drained by
voracious ashen clouds. Soon a light rain started to fall. The Henrithvale structures were shaken, Vic wasn’t sure what he should do.

The Northern Waters players seemed content now. Vic could see a change in their body language. When Peter Weston blew the whistle to recommence play the Tigers took control of the game, keeping Henrithvale from scoring and adding four goals and five points of their own. It would have been more but the ball had become greasy with the rain. The crowd was mute.

Vic was standing in the centre of the churned ground with his hands on his hips. The game was escaping him and he did not know how to get it back. The ball went out of bounds, and he took a moment to look at the Henrithvale Town Stand. He had sat there so many times in his life. Now those people in the stand were watching him and wanting him to be the one that could win the game. Above the stand grey clouds, swollen and fierce, continued to funnel into the valley.

He heard the sound of the ball being kicked, the perfect sound as it left the boot and turned through the air. The ball bounced and landed twenty metres away. Vic was behind his opponent but gave chase. They pushed and shoved at each other nudging the ball closer and closer to the boundary line until eventually it went out of play.

“Well done, Vic,” the call came from the crowd as he jogged away and he stopped at the familiar voice. Ignoring the game, he took a few steps towards the boundary line. It was his mother’s voice, he was sure of it. He began searching the faces, uncertain as to what he might find.

“C’mon, Vic,” Doc urged, and Vic turned as the boundary umpire hoisted the ball back into play.
“Go on, Vic, you can do it.” Vic knew it was her, but he kept running. The ball was forward of him now, and he ran to catch up to the pack that was following it. Players from both teams dived on the ball to try and lock it in, but there was a Henrithvale player he didn’t recognise bullocking his way forward, head over the ball. As the player made his way forward, he suddenly stopped and handballed the ball out to Vic, some twenty metres to the left of the congestion.

Vic didn’t have time to think. He had ten metres on his opponent, with the goals fifty metres away. He couldn’t kick that far on a dry day and now the ball was wet, heavy. He ran, reaching down to touch the ball on the ground. He saw that he still had five metres on his opponent and kept moving. There was no one to pass the ball to. He looked towards the goals, with the sound of blood in his ears, and kicked. He struck the ball so that it turned and twisted—a mongrel punt Herbert would call it—but it carried the distance and gave Henrithvale their only goal of the quarter.

The celebration on the ground and in the stands was subdued, but Vic felt as if he had shed a great burden.

A few moments later the siren ended the quarter and the Henrithvale players trudged over to the area of the ground in front of the stand. The Tigers players ran past clapping each other on the back, their broad grins revealing the confidence they carried. As they came off, the rain became thunderous, almost white. Yet the Henrithvale supporters did not leave, stoic and defiant they stayed in the stand or huddled under whatever shelter they could find. Brian cowered under a tattered brown raincoat and the players circled around him.

Vic’s goal had given him hope, but he sensed for many of his team mates the game was already lost. They would not be fooled anymore.

Brian stared at them as if he did not know who they were.
“This is not something I wanted to say, not today anyway, but there is nothing else I can think that might lift you up.” He dropped his head, and Vic looked down too. Brian’s shoes and the bottom of his pants were wet, covered in flecks of mud.

“Our appeal… our appeal to the GWDF has failed; there is no further course of action to be taken. After today there will be no more Western Football League, there will be no more Henrithvale Football Club.” Brian put his hand to his mouth.

“You’re it.” The players parted and let him hobble off the ground.

No one moved. It became an all-or-nothing game. Vic had the sense that he was alone, that all the Henrithvale players were alone, and they must now sail for home or disappear over the very edge of the world.

Just then, Dave emerged from the rain, pushing his way into the huddle.

“Anyone else have a fuckin’ cunt of a headache?” He smiled but his eyes looked colourless. “I’ll sit in the forward pocket. Just pump the fuckin’ ball in; don’t worry about kickin’ it to a lead.”

The siren sounded for the commencement of the last quarter.

“C’mon!” Dave raised his voice over the howl of the rain. “We’ll have a fuckin’ cry later.” Dave reached out his arms. Vic and the team pressed in tight for a moment and then broke away to run back to their positions.

Peter Weston blew his whistle and threw the ball in the air. Neither ruckman could get a decisive knock, but a Henrithvale player slapped the ball forward and Doc kicked it along the wet ground. Vic’s opponent was in front of him, but fumbled and lost his footing. Vic picked the ball up and, without looking, kicked it in the general direction of the goals. Dave watched the ball in flight, blocked the space where it was going to land from his opponent, then jumped forward and marked it on his chest. He
took a few steps back from the mark and then kicked the opening goal of the quarter. Vic and the other Henrithvale players ran towards him.

“C’mon, five fuckin’ more and it’s ours!” Dave roared.

“C’mon!” Vic added his voice.

The Northern Waters players were tired. When play recommenced, Vic saw how they struggled to clear the ball in the downpour. He could see the way that they looked at each other, wanting someone else to chase, someone else to tackle. For five minutes the ball moved back and forth across the centre square before Peter Weston gave Doc a free kick. Doc played on and handballed to Dean Pattison, who kicked another goal. The crowd emerged from the stand and pushed towards the edges of the ground, feeling that they too could decide the outcome of the match. There were no umbrellas. Vic felt their voices lift him up.

When play restarted, the ball found its way easily into the Henrithvale forward line. Dave threw himself on top of it as the Tigers players descended. Peter Weston paid another free kick and, as the Tigers players remonstrated, Dave played on and kicked another goal. The Henrithvale players converged on Dave grabbing at his jumper, pulling at his hair. Vic could see something rising in them, coming up through the ground. They needed three goals.

The Northern Waters moved the ball into their forward line. A player kicked wildly towards goal but missed, and Henrithvale cleared the ball up to the wing. Vic had run forward and was first to the ball; he scooped it up but was slung down hard to the muddy ground. There was mud in his eyes, but someone was there to help him up and to thumb the mud away. It was John, his father. He gave Vic an encouraging pat on the arm and took off towards the Henrithvale goals. Just near the fence his mother was standing with Herbert and Edna, their faces full of excitement and joy.
Vic ran after John, but was unable to keep up. John swiftly manoeuvred himself between players and scooped up the ball. Vic kept moving towards goals. John seemed to know just where Vic would be and he kicked the ball across his body, hitting Vic on the chest. The ball was wet and heavy and Vic could barely keep hold of it. He played on and kept running, his lungs too shocked to take in air, and kicked the ball, watching as it slid through for another goal. He pumped his fist in the air as the Henrithvale players mobbed him, the torrential rain forming puddles on the ground.

Twice Henrithvale moved the ball forward; twice they kicked for goal and missed. They were eight points behind and still needed two goals. The quarter was more than twenty minutes old; there could be no more than five minutes left.

Dave ran past Vic and said he was moving into the centre. Vic stayed across the half-forward line. The Tigers players flooded Henrithvale’s forward half. Dave took the ball from the centre and kicked long into the forward line. The ball hit the muddy ground and players from both teams converged.

“Hold it in! Hold it in!” The Tigers players yelled at each other.

Peter Weston blew his whistle and then threw the ball in the air to restart play. John ran in-between the two competing ruckmen, grabbed the ball and kicked, without even setting foot on the ground. The ball, like a great weight, beat the despairing hands of the Tigers players and sailed through for another goal. Henrithvale players threw their arms in the air in wild disbelief and celebration. They embraced Vic and patted him on the head.

One more goal and the game was theirs. The shouts from of the crowd, subdued by the storm, told Vic the game could be won.
The Tigers were frantic, cornered. As Peter Weston restarted play there were too many Tigers players in the centre square. Dean Pattison took the free kick and kicked the ball forward. Doc took a juggling chest mark in the middle of a group of six players. The crowd seemed like they might rush onto the ground. Doc took a breath, walked in and kicked. Vic watched as the ball was signalled a goal and the numbers on the scoreboard adjusted to show Henrithvale in front by four points.

“We’ve gotta hold on now!” Dave screamed at them.

Peter Weston looked up at the stand, cleaned the ball with his shirt as if stalling, and then restarted play. The ball moved into the Henrithvale forward line but was quickly cleared out again. A Tigers player sent the ball deep into the Tigers forward line. Peter Weston blew his whistle; there was a free kick, but Vic couldn’t see for which team. His heart slowed to a painful thud, then crawled to the surface of his skin. It was a free kick for the Tigers. Vic watched as the Tigers forward walked back to position, players around him hunched over, and kicked the ball. It seemed a certain goal, but the wind pushed it across and it seemed to have faded left. There was a moment, of uncertainty, and then the Tigers players leapt in the air, ecstatic. It was a goal and the Tigers were back in front.

“One more, Vic, one more,” Dave said, as he ran past for the bounce. He wasn’t beaten, but Vic felt sick. He waited on the edge of the centre square. When the ball came out, it moved towards the Tigers goal. The Tigers players pushed up the ground, trying to lock the ball in their forward half and the Henrithvale players followed them. Vic stood back waiting fifty metres from the Henrithvale goal.

Then he saw John pushing through a pack of players, accelerating away, carrying the ball and avoiding outstretched arms. He ran directly towards Vic, through the centre of the ground. Vic ran back towards the Henrithvale goal, leaving his
opponent caught between him and John. There were Tigers players chasing John but they weren’t gaining on him. Vic was only thirty metres away from the Henrithvale goal and his opponent had left him and was running to block John. John kicked the ball high into the air, and Vic watched it turn slowly, effortlessly, through the sky like some distant star falling to earth. The ball carried over Vic’s head. He ran to catch it before it hit the ground. There was nothing between him and the goal. He reached out his hands, the ball scraped his fingertips but was just beyond him. His legs were cramping. He just needed the ball to bounce, to sit up and he could run on to it. The ball hit the sodden ground and took a low, sharp break to the left. He was moving too fast. He stretched out his left hand, his fingertips brushing the ball’s rough surface. A pursuing Tigers player picked the ball, took a single step and kicked it back the way it had come. Vic lunged but there was nothing he could do. The siren sounded. The game was over.

The Tigers players were jubilant. Vic felt as if he were spinning around and around, end over end. He needed more time. He fell back onto the ground. The rain poured onto him. The noise of it was unbearable. He sat up and pulled his jumper half over his head and cried, great and terrible cries that had lain dormant within him for decades, and he could not stop. Someone rubbed his head.

“Unlucky bounce, mate,” a voice said. It was Dave, who dropped down next to him and wrapped his arms around Vic’s shoulders, kissing the top of his head. Vic clung to him.

Other players came over to them, some rubbing Vic’s head, others crying. In time they helped each other stand and headed slowly towards the clubrooms. Dave kept an arm around Vic’s shoulders. Tradition demanded that Henrithvale stay on the ground until after the presentation of the premiership cup, but it did not matter any
longer. As the Henrithvale players approached the stand the crowd, solemn and with their heads bowed, clapped but they too were broken, they too had been deceived. Vic heard the click of his boots on the concrete of the race and felt the ground telling them to leave.

Brian wouldn’t let anyone but the players in the clubrooms. He locked the door and they sat together in a silence that would bind them to each other forever. Now Vic could feel the wetness and coldness, the stinging cuts and the exhausted muscles. He looked quickly at his father’s photo on the wall above. The old man had been right about him. Vic took his towel out of his bag and hung it over his head. Nobody spoke for a long time. Players started to rise, move into the showers and dress, but Vic stayed where he was. He listened to the sound of them moving, of their bags opening. He sensed the steam of the showers making the air damp and knew there was no such thing as redemption.

Vic knew that Brian was close; his were the only footsteps discernible from others in the room. As those around him began to dress, Vic stood up, collected his things and went into the showers. He washed slowly, hiding in the shifting steam that filled the shower area. He dressed and looked at his muddy jumper, discarded on the bench. It was never much to look at, but it made him better than he ever was or ever would be.

With the players back in their everyday clothes, Brian cleared his throat loudly to get their attention. He seemed about to speak, but his face flushed with emotion and he looked up at the photos and trophies that lined the walls.

“Proud…. It was all he said.

Brian turned his back on the group, but they moved to him and embraced him. For a second, he clung to them.
“Alright. Alright.”

Brian adjusted his tie and glasses, tucked in his shirt, and then walked down the race. He opened the door. Slowly, wives, brothers, children and friends filled the room, found their loved ones and embraced them, shook their hands, smiled.

Vic couldn’t bring himself to look for Jane and the girls. With his head down, he became a shadow that walked out of the clubrooms and into the cool air of the late afternoon. The rain was gone. There had been plans to gather at the Royal Mail for post-match drinks, but Vic wanted no part of it and he guessed that neither did anyone else.

Jane and the girls would be here somewhere, but when it rained Jane stayed in the car. So be it. He could not look at his team mates or the stand or the ground or the people around him. He had failed them, but they had failed him too. To look at Dave or Doc or Brian, to walk out on the ground and stand just where he had come so close to atonement was not a weight he could carry. It was a grief akin to that he felt when his mother died, that he still felt when he thought about her for too long. Today there had been the chance to act. He thought of himself sinking and then settling on the ocean floor like the wreck of some great ship.

He got in the ute and sobbed, keeping his head down lest he be seen. He drove away from the ground and away from the town. He found himself turning down a gravel road and stopping in the car park of the Henrithvale cemetery.

The cemetery was quiet, surrounded by darkening hills. There were two sections: one for before 1930 and one for after 1930. Most of the graves in the old section were unmarked, the fires from 1930 that shattered the town burnt through the cemetery and few markers were replaced.
Vic’s mother and John were buried next to each other in the bottom left corner of the new section, although it was his mother’s grave that marked the bottom corner. Vic had been at her graveside when she was interred and later again when John was buried, but he had never thought of her as being in this place, so far away from where she should be. Her grey stone marker had her name, date of birth and date of death, but those things, Vic thought, didn’t say anything about her at all.

The grass was cut short and smooth, and he sat down next to her and looked out at the hills that were now all but lost in the dark of evening. The air was cold and he felt the wetness of the ground coming through his pants.

There were things he wanted to say, so that she knew, so that she understood, but they could not be said with words. He wanted her to tell him what to do. He reached out a hand and placed it where he thought hers would be. The crickets started to call in the night. Maybe tomorrow, he thought. He stood up, his arms stiff and his pants with wet patches from the ground. He bent over her gravestone and gently kissed its wet face. Then he walked quickly back to the ute and drove towards home along the roads that had carried him his entire life.
The rain returned as he drove home blurring the windscreen and forcing him to switch on the frayed wipers. The moon was obscured by low clouds, and as the ute rounded the corner towards the farm, the ute’s headlights were cast out towards his father’s tree. Standing on the side of the road was the desperado.

Vic pushed down on the brakes, and the ute went into a slide, coming up over the shoulder of the road and down into a ditch.

When the ute stopped moving, Vic sat very still and listened. None of the windows were broken and the wipers continued to shuffle back and forth across the windscreen. He moved his hands and his feet. There was no pain. He turned the key in the ignition and the engine whined. He gently put his foot down on the accelerator. The ute shuddered forward a few feet, then slid back on the wet grass and would move no more.

“Fuck!” Vic slapped his hands down on top of the steering wheel.

His door was jerked open. The rain swarmed into the cabin and he instinctively turned his face away. The desperado leaned in, forming a temporary wall between Vic and the outside world.

“This wouldn’t happen to a horse,” he said and grabbed hold of Vic’s arm, partly supporting him and partly dragging him out of the ute. There was hail now, and it came with such intensity that Vic could not lift his head.
“We got us a ways to go,” the desperado called through the downpour. “Ain’t nothing to be done ‘bout this.” Vic wanted to resist, wanted to say that he was going home, but the noise of the hail was replaced by a rising hiss in his ears until the inclement weather could only be felt and not heard. He found himself following the desperado through the darkness.

As they trudged through the wet paddock, the desperado cupped his hands and tried to light a cigarette. He failed, tried again and failed, and then gave up on the idea. He moved at a faster pace than Vic could manage and soon the desperado became a vague outline that Vic struggled to distinguish from the shapeless night around him. Vic stumbled after him. He walked, one difficult step after the other, the noise in his ears so loud that he covered them with his hands in an attempt to drive the sound away. The ground became steep, the grass knee length and matted by the rain. He stopped and looked back into the darkness. Far off on the horizon was a light that he knew to be home. When he turned around again the desperado was nowhere to be seen.

“Hey!” Vic shouted, but could not hear his own voice, only feel its vibration in his throat. He waited, took a few steps and then yelled out again. He kept walking. The ground was so steep now that he started to stagger and fall. In the distance he could see a faint light and he walked towards it. The light belonged to a rough-hewn cabin.

Vic pushed open the crudely fashioned door. The cabin was warm and had a single room partially illuminated by a kerosene lantern and a fire in a fireplace built of river stone. The desperado was sitting at a table next to a square window. Along the wall opposite him was a single bed, the blankets folded back in readiness.
Vic shut the door behind him and the flames in the fireplace flickered in fright and then resettled. There was darkness in the corners of the cabin, and primitive shadows shifted across the floorboards and up the walls, vanishing and then reappearing.

“S’mthin’ wrong with yer legs?” The desperado broke the silence. “Had a brother with polio walk faster ‘an that.”

Vic shuffled over to the fire, dripping water across the floorboards. He rubbed his hands, feeling his joints begin to loosen and the skin beneath his clothes warm from the heat of the flames. The desperado, he saw, was keeping a futile watch from the window, his rifle leaning against the table next to him. The only thing Vic could see in the window was the desperado’s reflection. Vic looked at the door and wondered if he should leave, but there was something that held him where he was, something outside that frightened him.

“You best get yourself ready,” the desperado instructed, without taking his eyes off the black pane of the window.

“For what?” Vic asked, even though he realised that he did know, had always known.

“Here’s the son of a bitch now.”

The desperado sprang out of his seat, shed his jacket and picked up his rifle. There was a revolver holstered on his hip. Vic was still wondering what he should do when William Mulholland pushed open the door and stepped into the cabin. He folded his umbrella, shaking the rain from it, and leaned it neatly in the corner as he closed the door.

“I was under the impression this was to be a civil conversation,” Mulholland said, as he looked at the desperado’s gun.
“You got the wrong impression then, didn’t you?” The desperado cocked the rifle, pointing it at Mulholland’s chest.

Mulholland smiled, opened his arms and looked towards Vic. The light from the fireplace cloaked Mulholland first in darkness and then in light.

“Vic, I thought we were on good terms. I came here in good faith to further both our interests.”

“Horse shit.” The desperado widened his stance, steadying himself. Mulholland kept his eyes on Vic, and Vic knew that he was not afraid.

“I heard you had some cause for celebration, Vic?” Vic wasn’t sure for a moment what he meant; they had lost the game and lost the football club. Then it struck him, Mulholland was talking about the irrigation leases. “Let me tell you something else you might yet consider.”

“C’mon,” the desperado urged Vic between clenched teeth.

“Wait,” Vic heard himself say loudly to the desperado. He felt the urge to run, but he realised that it wasn’t coming from him. It was coming from the desperado.

“It’s true, Vic, it’s true, there will be no forced requisition of the irrigation leases,” Mulholland went on, clasping his hands together as the desperado’s finger caressed the trigger on the rifle. “Now, that might have you thinking we’ll all just go away and leave you alone. But you see, Vic, what we’ll do is reduce your irrigation quota year after year, reduce your subsidy, reduce the tariffs. Starve you out and leave you with nothing.”

Mulholland shifted his attention to the desperado.

“This way of doing things,” he gestured with a nod of his head, “this way is in the past.”
He took a step forward, returning his attention to Vic. “You can sell, Vic, right here and now, walk away with money in your pocket for yourself, for Jane and little Sarah and Emily.”

Mulholland reached inside his coat and slowly withdrew a collection of documents. An earnestness came into his voice “Here it is, Vic, something for the future.”

The desperado edged backwards, knocking into the table so that the kerosene lantern hissed, and pressed himself against the wall of the cabin.

“You sign an’ it’s done for you, always will be. That ain’t no way to live.”

The desperado spoke quickly, his eyes on Mulholland, his hands tightly wound around the rifle.

Mulholland ignored him.

“Tomorrow, Vic, the offer will be gone.” He tilted his head just so. “Property prices these days are a volatile thing. If you don’t take an opportunity when it comes why it might just pass you by.” Mulholland slowly unfolded the paper. “Do you want to stay on that land without the water, without income, with your football team, and your family gone?”

Vic sensed a growing warmth in his chest and in his throat, and as he opened his mouth it escaped.

Mulholland took another step forward. Reaching out his right hand, he pushed down the barrel of the desperado’s rifle. The desperado could not resist.

“There we go, Vic, easy does it, easy does it.” Mulholland took a silver pen out of the breast pocket of his jacket and held it out to Vic.
“You’re doing what is best for your family, Vic, you know that don’t you?”

He lay the paperwork on the table, pointing to the line on the document where Vic needed to sign.

Vic moved forward, coming between Mulholland and the desperado. He tentatively lifted his hand, his fingers taking a momentary hold of the desperado’s sleeve. Then he let go and took hold of the pen, signed his name and then turned away from the table.

“There we are.” Mulholland folded the document and put it back inside his jacket pocket.

“Now.” Mulholland put the palm of his right hand on Vic’s chest and gently moved him backwards. Then he took the rifle from the desperado’s hands and lifted the barrel.

“No!” Vic tried to move between the end of the barrel and the desperado but the rifle fired before he could move.

The bullet struck the desperado’s chest and knocked him, arms flailing, into the wall. He slumped down to the rough floorboards. His shirt, where the bullet had entered his chest, was on fire. Vic dropped to his knees and patted the flames with his hands. The desperado seemed to be trying to stand and trying to take in immense breaths, but he could do neither. The heels of his boots and his fingers clawed at the floorboards. His shirt was turning red as the blood escaped his chest wound.

Vic turned around. Mulholland put the rifle on the table. He blew out the flame in the kerosene lantern, collected his umbrella and was gone.

Vic pulled off his shirt and bunched it over the desperado’s wound. With his left hand he cradled the desperado’s head. The desperado’s hands touched at the
wound and then pushed at Vic’s stomach and chest. He turned his head to the left and the right to avoid looking at Vic.

“Don’t…” The desperado coughed as his chest sank. “Don’t you bury me in this goddamned place.”

“I’m sorry.” Vic could think of nothing else to say. He pressed down on his shirt and lifted the desperado’s head higher so that it lay almost in his lap.

“I, I want …” Then, as simply as if he were closing a door or taking off a long worn pair of boots, the desperado died.

Vic instinctively picked him up as if he were a sleeping child, the desperado’s legs and head lolling over his arms, and stumbled towards the bed. He placed the desperado awkwardly on the mattress, and then steadied himself against the cabin wall. He watched, waiting for the desperado to open his eyes, to curse, but he did not move.

The logs in the fireplace shifted, and outside Vic could hear the rain and the blare of the wind. He carefully removed the desperado’s boots and placed them neatly by the bed. Then he unbuckled his gun belt and placed it next to the boots. Finally, he rolled the desperado onto his side so that he faced the wall. The blood from his wound had already pooled on the mattress. Vic covered the desperado with a blanket, but did not cover his face.

Vic had blood on his hands. He could smell its rawness. There was numbness in his limbs, in his thoughts, as if he had lost circulation. He could not feel the wetness in his shoes but knew it was still there. He shuffled towards the rattling door as the driving wind pushed under it, harassing the flames in the fireplace. He thought to say something, then opened the cabin door, stepped outside and gently closed it
behind him. Then he started to run, fleeing as fast he could back into the darkness that was waiting.
Vic was woken by the sound of Jane frantically saying his name. He felt her hands rocking his shoulders and he opened his eyes. Jane was still rocking him but she was looking towards the bedroom door.

“Don’t come in! Sarah, don’t come in!” Her voice, he thought, sounded like his mother’s.

When Jane looked down at him and saw that he was awake, she sat back on the bed, her breathing short and heavy. She stared at him, her lips moving but not making any sound. Then she covered her face with her hands as if Vic were a strange apparition she wanted to disappear.

“Mummy, mummy?” Sarah’s voice called. Vic looked towards the bedroom door as it creaked open. Jane got up, took a few steps and blocked Sarah from coming in the room.

“It’s alright, sweetheart, Mummy will be there in a minute.” Jane pushed the door closed and returned to the edge of the bed.

Slowly, Vic sat up. His back was stiff and his right shoulder was tender. There was dried blood on his hands, on the sheets and smeared across his stomach like tribal markings.

“Ute came off the road last night. Stuck in a ditch.” He rubbed his hands together. “Hit my nose on the steering wheel.” His left hand moved gently to his nose, but it was not swollen or sore. “Must’ve staggered home.”
Jane’s eyes worked over him, taking it all in; the blood on the sheets, on his hands, spread in patterns over his naked torso by fingers she did not know.

“I’ll give Dave a call, get him to bring the tractor, haul the ute out.”

Jane stood up, her arms wrapped around her shoulders. She was wearing jeans and a t-shirt, but her hair was unkempt as if she had just awoken. He could tell she had been biting her fingernails again; the ends of her fingers looked raw. Vic shifted so that he was sitting on the edge of the bed, his feet on the floor.

“I signed last night.” The words were blank, soulless.

She nodded her head gently and began to cry. Then she looked back at him, her eyes low, not wanting to meet his. She opened her mouth and then quickly, silently, left the room. He thought she might have thanked him, said something conciliatory. He thought about the apple trees, and he did not want to face them.

Vic waited by the side of the road for Dave. The rain from last night had passed and the sky was a placid blue. He could see the distant hills and the desperado receding into the past. Vic heard Dave before he saw him and turned to see the tractor lurching along the road. Dave, in sleeveless overalls and muddy boots, stopped alongside Vic. He looked at the ute in the ditch.

“Shit place to park.”

They worked together to get ropes under the ute and around the axel. Then Vic started the ute and Dave eased the tractor forward. The ute came out easily, as if the tractor had not been needed after all.

“How’s ya head?” Vic asked, as he cleared debris from the front of the ute.

“Alright,” Dave said, blocking the sun from his eyes with his hands.
“Yeah,” Vic stood up and dusted off his hands.

“Shit game, eh?” Dave sighed.

“I reckon.” Vic looked at the ground.

“So, I sold up.” Dave said in a timid voice. Vic looked up at him, “Reckon you have too.”

“Yeah,” Vic said and rubbed his hands over his head.

“Gunna clean out that fuckin’ stink shed of yours?” Dave asked.

“Probably should.” Vic felt ashamed.

“They can fuckin’ have all the shit I’ve got stuck in sheds here and there.” Vic didn’t know how to continue and he got the feeling that Dave didn’t either.

“We’re goin’ ta head out. Goin’ to Bairnsdale, we’re thinkin’ of a bed-and-breakfast.” He reached into his pocket and took out a small piece of paper. On it, in neat capitals he had written his name, the address in Bairnsdale and the phone number. Awkwardly Vic stepped forward, reached out took the piece of paper from Dave.

“Yeah, cheers.” He wondered how to reciprocate.

They shook hands. David Foster, the most ardent and reliable of friends. Vic could not recall an argument or harsh word between them. It was Dave who had so often been there when his mother could not, Dave who would not let him fall. There was nothing that could be said. He looked at Dave, looked right into his eyes. Yet he could not look at Dave and not think of John or of Brian or the football club or the farm or his mother.

“Don’t be a stranger.” The tractor rattled and chugged forward and Vic waved as he drove away; he looked at the piece of paper and held it tight in his hands.
Vic drove the ute home and parked in the carport. He could see the house in the rear-view mirror. He wondered if there would be other people living in the house after they had gone, or if it would be left so that in time the roof would lift and the rain would find its way in, the walls buckling and then collapsing. Then grass seeds would get inside one day and eventually there would be just the foundations left to let show that once there was a home here.

Vic opened the back door and stepped inside, Jane approached him before he had time to pull it shut. She took a tentative step forward and lightly embraced him, her hands and arms making the shape of his shoulders but hovering just above them, as if he were so brittle that an embrace might shatter him.

“Might go for a walk,” he said. He could smell pancakes. The butter was burning. Jane let him go.

He walked over to the machinery shed and stood inside, looking around. There was too much to sort through. He had no idea what might be buried under the boxes and engine parts and tools that had accumulated generation after generation. Some of it came from his grandfather, maybe even his great-grandfather. The clutter could stay. Vic did not want it, did not want to sort through it. He would let it be.

He wandered towards the trees. He ached for them. He had laboured for them all of his life. They would most likely die, although a few might remain, maybe the Black Twigs. He had seen it before; old properties where the house had been gone for decades, but the trees remained, stubborn apple, pear and lemon trees that would not yield. He thought of the desperado.

He walked beyond the orchard to where the land became steep and rocky. Patches of blackberry bushes reached out for his legs. There were rabbit droppings and tunnels that led to burrows that had been here since the area was first settled. The
rabbits would outlast everything. Nothing could drive them away; there was no predator, no virus, nothing. He continued on to the rail cutting and further to where the station house had always been. Now there was just an oddly shaped mound, covered by thick grass. Vic sat down and looked up at the suddenly darkening sky that already smelled of rain.

He would never come back here. This place would fall into some corner of his mind and would, he knew, return to him only in frightening moments of sleep from which he would wake and stare into the night. He waited until the rain came, until he felt it soak through his clothes, until his hands were shaking. He lay down on the ground. He wanted to scream, but when he opened his mouth there was nothing, just as it had been when he was a child. He heard himself weeping, then crying and he hugged his knees close to his chest.

Jane took the girls and went to Bendigo and Vic waited. He cleaned the shed, sold farm machinery and counted down the days until settlement. He could have left a week after Jane, he saw her at Edna’s funeral and told her there was more to do than he thought. He spoke to the girls on the phone, spent a weekend in Bendigo with them and they cried when he left. He stayed on the farm and left Henrithvale alone and it didn’t bother him. Although he received a letter from Brian a few days after the girls were withdrawn from the school. It told Vic his membership in The Henrithvale Grower’s Association had been terminated and that he had no place at the meetings. It said the town would prosper without him, that he didn’t have the courage of those around him, those that had come before. So be it.
Vic slept on an inflated mattress in the lounge room. He dreamt about the Grand Final, about the final few seconds. Sometimes he caught the ball but did not know where the goals were, other times, no matter how hard he kicked the ball it would not budge from the mud. He wanted to change the outcome, but not even his dreams could help. His thoughts were harassed by what might have been; if only the kick had dropped short and landed in his arms, or the bounce had sat up so he could gather and then run in and kick a goal. Maybe he should have pressed back harder, run faster, maybe he shouldn’t have come so far up the ground. Maybe he should’ve sold the farm when John died and just been done with it then. Maybe he could’ve found something else. That ball. He had touched it, felt it on the tips of his fingers, could still feel it like the ghost of a long gone limb.

Sometimes at night he thought he heard noises, ugly voices pushing up from under the floor boards. Sometimes he would call out, hoarse and desperate and then lay still with fear so strong his jaw felt as if it had locked into place. It was John’s house now.

On the morning of settlement day a young man in a suit knocked on the back door, smiled uncomfortably and said he was to take vacant possession. Vic deflated the air mattress and packed it in the back of the ute next to a collection of tarp covered boxes. He signed the paperwork the young man had and handed him the key.

“S’pose you want me to go?” Vic said and the young man did not seem to know how to answer.

Vic sat in the ute, and the urge to run, to be somewhere whispered through his veins. He took a slow breath, worked to subdue the feeling and drove to where the driveway met with the road. He sat there and watched a crow at rest in the updraft over the endless hills. Then suddenly it turned and disappeared towards town. Last
night the wondrous dream returned but it was only now that he recalled it. Again, he had marvelled at the vivid desert with its reddish sand, flaxen coloured grass, immense sandstone buttes and menacing blue sky. Only he was no longer standing on the veranda of the rough-hewn house watching an approaching horse and rider. Now, he was the rider. He noted a small gathering on the veranda but his eyes were drawn to the pitch-dark that existed inside the house beyond the open door.

As he neared the house the horse stopped and he eased himself down and walked towards the people on the veranda. He did not recognise them but thought them familiar. One by one they turned away from him and entered the house. He walked forward and stood on the edge of the veranda, his left arm holding onto his right elbow and his shadow extending into the pitch-dark. If the people inside were looking out at him they would see none of his features, only a silhouette. He wondered if he should enter the house but then the dream ended.

He did not know what to make of it and turned the ute out onto the road, glancing up at the rear view mirror. On the edge of the driveway his mother was decorating the front gate with Christmas tinsel. She held up a hand as if to call him home, but smiled, gave a gentle wave and he drove on.
Hegemonic Masculinity in Transition

The creative artefact and this exegesis investigate the disruption to traditional patriarchal hierarchies in the post-World War II era. While the creative artefact is a novel investigating hegemonic masculinity in transition in an Australian setting, this exegesis is focussed on the representations of changing masculinities in the US films, *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* and *Field of Dreams*. The film of *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* is adapted from the 1953 Dorothy Johnson short story of the same name; *Field of Dreams* is an adaptation of the 1982 W.P. Kinsella novel *Shoeless Joe*. However, the film version of each text is more widely recognised than the printed version and better suited to the concerns of this exegesis. The prevalence and dominance of US film and TV in Australia is seen, in combination with patriarchy, as providing a transcultural expression of shared values, beliefs and experiences.

A specific focus in the creative artefact and the exegesis is the supposed crisis in masculinity that has been articulated by several theorists as the decline of a social good. The contention of the creative artefact and the exegesis is that dominant capitalist practices have increasingly destabilised and reshaped institutions that promote patriarchal hierarchies. This has highlighted the friction that exists between patriarchy and capitalism as increasingly competitive social systems. Consequently this destabilisation and friction has led to a critique and reassessment of masculinity and masculine performance. The creative artefact and the exegesis examine specific contexts where destabilisation and critique of patriarchal hierarchies has challenged and changed societal and personal relationships. The creative artefact and the exegesis
also examine how responses to this change have often been articulated as a loss or crisis that needs to be remedied.

The exegesis is divided into three chapters. The first chapter defines patriarchy and tracks the emergence of feminist criticism in the post-War era. It also discusses the relationship patriarchy has with capitalism in the post-War era, exploring how the emerging movement of women from the home to the labour force was the catalyst for a reconfiguration of the relationship men and women had with each other and with dominant social institutions. These new relationships made traditional patriarchal institutions and understandings of masculinity and femininity vulnerable. In response to this there were changes in the way traditional patriarchal notions were expressed by social institutions and this led to the notion, popularised by a number of theorists, that masculinity was, or is, suffering a type of crisis. This created a push back against the criticisms of hegemonic masculinity advanced by feminism.

The second chapter of the exegesis examines the Western film genre. Will Wright, in his influential work *Sixguns and Society: A Structural Study of the Western*, discusses the relationship between the Western and myth, arguing that “although Western novels reach a large and faithful audience, it is through the movies that the myth has become part of the cultural language by which America understands itself.” (1977, p.12) Following on from Wright, this section examines the Western film genre as involved in the mythopoeic reconstruction of the past in a way that promotes patriarchal hierarchies as natural and necessary to the present and to the future. The focus of this section is John Ford and his 1962 film *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*. Ford is identified as promoting the virtues of patriarchy and in particular a masochistic version of masculinity that has its roots in the Judeo-Christian
tradition. Crucially, the film features John Wayne who embodied that mythic version of masculinity more than anyone else.

In *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*, Ford effectively compares the traditional masochistic hegemonic masculinity with an emergent narcissistic masculinity, shaped by capitalism and desire for systemic change. Ford does this to highlight the shortcomings of the emerging masculinity and to suggest that the loss of a masochistic version of masculinity is tragic, because only the masochistic masculinity can truly be heroic and Christ-like. *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* thus critiques the challenge to traditional notions of patriarchy by representing its demise as a phenomenon that robs individuals of the potential for heroism and denies the community a social good.

The third chapter of the exegesis is focussed on the 1989 Phil Alden Robinson film *Field of Dreams*. This chapter contends that as the Western genre declined, the masochistic version of masculinity and the patriarchal hierarchies that privilege men over women found expression in sex segregated sports, creating space for the re-enactment of the Western hero. The male athlete is also seen as Christ-like in his suffering and heroism. Indeed, this section contends that sport has become akin to religion because it incorporates many of the motifs commonly associated with Christianity, such as patriarchal authority, sacrifice, resurrection and redemption.

*Field of Dreams* is identified, in this chapter, as a magic realist text that gives expression to a marginalised voice, as it is often theorised, even if marginality is configured in an unusual sense. This magic realist film positions its protagonist, Ray Kinsella, as under siege from capitalism, positioning the white male as the marginalised outsider struggling against the colonising force of capitalism. *Field of Dreams* also challenges the validity and worth of the social justice movements of the
1960s, suggesting they have fractured the natural order of relationships and separated the most sacred relationship of the father and the son. In this way, it resonates with Ford’s Western, The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance. However, unlike The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance, Field of Dreams sees the past as redeemable. Indeed, it suggests that there is still time to reassert traditional patriarchal hierarchies as they existed in the pre-World War II era—if people believe and have faith. In this way, the film mobilises Christian mythology.

In Literature through Film: Realism, Magic, and the Art of Adaptation, Robert Stam argues that cinema has been associated “from the beginning both with realism and with the magical and the oneiric.” (2005, p.13) This point is advanced further by R.W. Rieber and R.J. Kelly in Film, Television and the Psychology of the Social Dream, where they argue that the narrative structure and techniques that film employs are part of the mythopoeic process by which individuals process and make sense of their experiences. They contend that “the ‘language’ of film is very similar to and may have borrowed from dreams. This language consists of montages, flashbacks, and close-ups and it is characterized by the abolition of the temporal element and the subversion of causality.” (2014, p.12) For Rieber and Kelly, film and television “have the capacity to capture consciousness as well as conscience,” which “constitute the foundation of what we call the cultural psychology of the cinema—or what may be thought of as the social dream.” (p.1) The power of a film such as Field of Dreams to construct a social dream—a mythopoeic power in which it encourages its viewers to believe—is apparent in the enduring popularity of the site where the film was shot, which has become a site of tourist pilgrimage.

The creative artefact is a novel that, like the texts studied in the exegesis, focuses on a transition away from hegemonic masculinity that is precipitated by
capitalism. *Faded yellow by the winter*, set in rural Victoria, Australia, follows the declining fortunes of apple farmer Vic Morrisson. Vic faces the potential requisition of his farm, a farm that has been in his family for generations, because of a changing economy. In this way Vic faces a similar predicament to the character of Tom Doniphon (played by John Wayne) in *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* and Ray Kinsella (Kevin Costner) in *Field of Dreams*, who are also farmers and men working on the ‘frontier’, in that outside forces are reshaping labour and social relationships.

Vic, like Ray in *Field of Dreams*, seeks solace in sport. Vic is enthralled by what he sees as the redemptive powers of Australian Rules Football: the prospect that the past can be remade by success in the present. When the football club is threatened, Vic is forced to confront the loss of those determinedly patriarchal structures that define economic and social relationships in his town, and that also define him. Vic is shadowed throughout the narrative by the desperado, a nineteenth-century cowboy who encourages him to persist regardless of the economic or personal cost. The desperado is a moral individualist in the mould of Tom Doniphon from *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*. The desperado is opposed by William Mulholland, the engineer responsible for building the aqueducts that provide water to Los Angeles. Mulholland, representing the bank’s interests, encourages Vic to ignore sentimentality, sell what he has and move on.

Employing archetypes from the Western, and engaging with sporting culture, *faded yellow by the winter* attempts to capture the psychological struggle of a man forced to change, with the form of the novel providing a strong medium for representing interiority. However, the novel does not hold back from a critique of patriarchal hierarchies and traditional hegemonic masculinity, highlighting the trauma these impose on the individual and on societies. In *Exploding the Western: Myths of*
*Empire on the Postmodern Frontier*, Sara Spurgeon argues that revisionary writers such as Cormac McCarthy, Leslie Marmon Silko and Ana Castillo powerfully transform the frontier myth and broaden its appeal for a globalised world. Spurgeon says of McCarthy that “his voice and the frontier heroes he creates are both a continuance of the tradition of Western writing and a dark and complex counterpoint to it.” (2005, p.17) The creative artefact aims to achieve a similar effect.
1. Patriarchy under siege

In western society, despite recent challenges, patriarchy remains a pervasive social system. Patriarchy is hierarchical and is premised on male domination and female subordination. Social institutions have been founded on and structured around these patriarchal assumptions which make a number of distinctions between men and women defined in terms of masculine and feminine characteristics. However, as this chapter suggests, the practice of patriarchy is complex and open to challenge and change.

The first section of this chapter highlights the relationship between patriarchy and capitalism, using the work of the feminist critic Sylvia Walby to track the changes that have occurred to patriarchal systems as a result of patriarchy’s intersection with capitalism in the post-World War II era. These changes, which saw women enter the workforce in unprecedented numbers to serve capitalism and consumerism at the expense of patriarchy, led to new feminist criticisms pertaining to the structure and function of patriarchal understandings and institutions. The second section of this chapter focusses on how critics of patriarchy, such as R.W. Connell and Judith Butler, have questioned the legitimacy of masculinity and femininity as natural and biologically determined ways of being. The third section of this chapter looks at how “second wave” feminism and post-World War II capitalism together have posed a challenge to patriarchy. Feminism’s challenge comes from its questioning of the legitimacy of patriarchy and patriarchal institutions as natural and necessary. Capitalism, however, has the potential to usurp patriarchy as the dominant social system because it is more flexible than patriarchy and invites participation as a
pathway to change. The last section of this chapter examines the notion that masculinity is in crisis, that something untoward is occurring and needs to be remedied, and posits that patriarchal institutions are adapting to address the challenges made by feminism and capitalism.

**Patriarchy and its uneasy relationship with capitalism**

The term patriarchy cannot be reasonably reduced to a short definition without simplifying the labyrinthine relationships at play within such a social system. Gillian Howie, in *Between Feminism and Materialism: A Question of Method*, provides a historical definition: “the term patriarchy has Greek roots in ‘patria,’ which means family, and ‘archy’ which means rule. It was initially applied to male heads of families exerting autocratic rule and then, by extension, to scriptural fathers and governments ruled by senior men (patriarchs).” (2010, p.180) Allan Johnson provides a more expansive description in *Gender Knot: Unravelling Our Patriarchal Legacy*:

patriarchy is based in part on a set of symbols and ideas that make up a culture embodied by everything from the content of everyday conversation to literature and film. Patriarchal culture includes ideas about the nature of things, including women, men, and humanity, with manhood and masculinity most closely associated with being human and womanhood and femininity relegated to the marginal position of ‘other.’ (2005, pp.138-139)
What is consistent in definitions of patriarchy is that it promotes a gendered world view, one that differentiates between male and female based on biological essentialism, and attributes characteristics and qualities based on this differentiation. Those characteristics and attributes seen as exclusively male, or masculine, are promoted as ideal, desirable and necessary for social cohesion, prosperity and progression.

In *Theorizing Patriarchy*, Sylvia Walby distinguishes between “private patriarchy” and “public patriarchy” in ways that are useful for this chapter and its desire to conceptualise a transition within patriarchal systems. She defines her terms thus:

Private patriarchy is based upon household production, with a patriarch controlling women individually and directly in the relatively private sphere of the home. Public patriarchy is based on structures other than the household, although this may still be a significant patriarchal site. (1990, p.178)

Walby also identifies six main patriarchal structures through which women experience subordination and exploitation:

- the patriarchal mode of production; patriarchal relations in paid work; patriarchal relations in the state; male violence; patriarchal relations in sexuality; and patriarchal relations in cultural
Walby contends that these forms of subordination and exploitation exist within both public and private patriarchy to differing degrees. In private patriarchy the oppression and exploitation that is directly experienced comes predominantly from a specific man or group of men that are known and identifiable. In public patriarchy the oppression and exploitation comes from many men, known and unknown, and it comes directly through interactions, language and attitudes, and indirectly through social institutions such as sport, film, advertising and religion.

Walby argues that the form and prevalence of patriarchal structures changed in the movement she identifies from nineteenth-century private patriarchy to twentieth-century public patriarchy, but that patriarchy did not concede ground. Rather there was a change of approach in the form of subjugation and exploitation that women experienced, from exclusionary under private patriarchy to segregationist under public patriarchy.

Tracking the shift from private patriarchy to public patriarchy, Walby outlines the changes in paid employment that occurred throughout the twentieth century because of conflict, including World War I and World War II, which necessitated that women move into previously masculine roles to maintain the production required for the war effort. Walby also contends that first and second-wave feminism, which challenged the biological imperative of patriarchy, also led to changes in paid employment. This change, however, led to conflict between patriarchy and capitalism because “the utilization of women’s labour by one system is at the expense of the other; if women are working for capitalists they have less time to work for their husbands.” (p.41) Walby suggests that it has historically been the state that has
intervened to restrict women, such as in Britain during World War II when “the Restoration of the Pre-War Practices Act 1942 was passed supporting the all-male unions’ demands that if they allowed women in for the duration of the war they would be expelled at the end of it.” (p.51) Yet, in the post-war period patriarchy has been unable to resist the capitalist imperative and has transitioned from exclusionary to segregationist or from private patriarchy to public patriarchy. Segregation has been achieved, in part, through keeping women in subordinated positions and restricting access to powerful positions. It has also been achieved with support from cultural institutions. However, the shift has nevertheless provided women with the opportunity to be in control of their own labour and move away from the patriarchal household.

For Walby, if public patriarchy has, in recent times, become so pervasive, it is largely through the influence of capitalism and as a result of growing and diversified consumer markets and increasingly sophisticated communication technologies. This allows cultural institutions to be more omnipresent in society. Cultural institutions, Walby asserts, are concerned with social relations and “ideas about masculinity and femininity are to be found in all areas of social relations; they are part of the actions which go to make up the patriarchal structures.” (p.90) There is the need for cultural institutions such as sport, film and advertising to remain hierarchical, and hierarchical predominately along gender lines, in terms of the ideas and concerns they promote because “the keys to the patriarchal relations in culture are the differentiation of the discourses of femininities and masculinities, and the valuation of masculinity above those of femininity.” (p.104) Often these institutions have become segregationist rather than exclusionary, drawing definite lines between male performances and female performances so that biological essentialism, although no longer explicitly espoused, nevertheless lingers. However, in other cultural institutions, such as formal
education, Walby extols the reforms that have led to more inclusiveness. This also has its dangers as it can promote the notion that there is now equality and that a focus on patriarchal relations is not necessary. However, Walby suggests that, although patriarchal relations may be less present in one institution than another, this does not mean that there are not patriarchal relations at play. Cultural institutions are intertwined and can often influence or reflect the trends developed in each other.

Thus, although Walby sees the emergence of industrialisation and the growth of capitalism as changing patriarchy, she believes this challenge has been overstated. By comparison, in *Patriarchy and Accumulation on a World Scale: Women in the International Division of Labour*, Maria Mies sees capitalism and patriarchy as inseparable, suggesting their function is not only to subordinate women but also to exploit them, otherwise the subordination would serve no function. Mies states that “capitalism cannot function without patriarchy” and “that the goal of this system, namely the never-ending process of capital accumulation, cannot be achieved unless patriarchal man-woman relations are maintained or newly created.” (1998, p.38) This objective, and how it is achieved, is the focus of her work.

Walby sees worth in “dual-system” proponents, such as Mies who argue that patriarchy and capitalism are interdependent, because such work illuminates new sites of subordination and exploitation. However, Walby believes a failing of such an approach is its inability to see the friction between patriarchy and capitalism. Walby believes that the “state should be considered to be both patriarchal and capitalist” (1990, p.160), rather than a morphing of the two. She makes this distinction on the basis of class relations and gender relations. Walby believes that capitalism has led to a restructuring of class relations but not gender relations. In this way capitalism may be a separate system, but it is also another tool that patriarchy uses.
This chapter follows Walby’s belief that capitalism is a tool of patriarchy, but it also contends that capitalism has the potential to supersede patriarchy. This thesis disagrees with Mies that capitalism and patriarchy are inseparable and suggests, like Walby, that there is increasing friction between them. This friction, in combination with feminism, has disrupted gender relations and focussed a critical gaze on masculinity as the cornerstone of patriarchy. Masculinity as a practice has been revealed as hierarchical, bound up with capitalism but also potentially vulnerable. The threat posed to hegemonic masculinity by feminism is not that it will be usurped but rather that it will be standardised with femininity, because men can be preyed on by market forces with the same voracity that afflicts women. Indeed, the threat is ultimately that in time patriarchy will be eroded, replaced entirely by capitalism. Capitalism and patriarchy share the need for a hierarchical system but patriarchy has more rigid requirements, demanding women always be subservient to men. However, capitalism does not have such requirements. Thus there is an ongoing tension between the two because for capitalism there is profit to be found in using and exploiting groups in the labour market regardless of gender. The contention here is that patriarchal institutions are unwilling to concede their privileged status and seek to promote the ongoing necessity for a gender hierarchy through male-centric gender performance and a mythologised “natural” patriarchal order.

**Destabilising masculinity as the cornerstone of patriarchy**

Challenges to patriarchy, such as those issued by capitalism and feminism, have inevitably led to a reconsideration of the patriarchal assumption that masculinity and femininity are biologically defined and carry with them a natural set of characteristics
and abilities. Patriarchy is premised on a gender hierarchy, which has been denounced by feminism and destabilised through critical examination. While feminism initially focused on resisting feminine stereotypes, masculinity has also undergone scrutiny in recent decades.

R.W. Connell, in his landmark work *Masculinities*, sees social practices in western culture as gendered and dominated by patriarchy, which inevitably leads to a gendered order that places masculinity above femininity. Connell believes that masculinity cannot exist without femininity because they are understood in relation to each other. However, the nature of this relationship is not stable and there is change, or exchange, that takes place. This, Connell concludes, is a result of other systems such as class, race, ethnicity and sexuality that traverse masculinity, none of which can be understood in isolation from each other. In this way masculinity is temporary and contextual. Because of this Connell promotes the term “masculinities” rather than masculinity, given that there is not one masculinity but many varied masculinities. From this we get the term “hegemonic masculinity”, which refers to the current dominant form of masculinity.

Connell identifies four practices in terms of masculinity that he labels “hegemony”, “subordination”, “cooperation” and “marginalization”. “Hegemony” is the dominant form of masculinity. However, it can be challenged and replaced. “Subordination” occurs where the hegemonic masculinity demands the subordination of other forms of masculinity and also femininity. “Cooperation” works on the premise that most men, personally, do not fulfil all the criteria of the hegemonic masculinity but they benefit from it. They support the system, consciously and subconsciously; to maintain their privileged position even if they do not always, in actions and words, adhere to the systems criteria. “Marginalization” occurs when one
form of masculinity actively seeks to oppress another, such as heterosexual masculinity marginalizing homosexual masculinity.

These definitions usefully suggest that masculinity is not stable and does not exist equally within all males. They also, of course, demonstrate how masculinity is hierarchical and often exclusive.

Pointing out how masculinity is also inextricably related to an embodied act Connell argues that “the constitution of masculinity through bodily performance means that gender is vulnerable when the performance cannot be sustained.” (2005, p.54) Failure to meet particular culturally defined standards leaves a man open to symbolic emasculation, real and perceived, privately and publicly. Such cultural performance has become more crucial in a time when masculinity is increasingly scrutinised. The challenge to masculinity, in a sense, is that it is now being asked what value or worth it has. Performance is no longer just about displaying necessary characteristics but also being able to articulate their necessity.

David Buchbinder, in *Masculinities and Identities*, similarly sees masculinity as culturally constructed and fluid, rather than as an objective or biological condition. Like Connell, he also points out that gender is relational and bound up with a hierarchical system. Buchbinder argues that identifying as masculine is contingent on the acceptance of those already identified as masculine, stating that “the rules of gender behaviour,” formal and informal, are “often vague, and learned mostly by observation and imitation rather than through direct instruction.” (1994, p.34) Buchbinder suggests this process of socialisation begins early on, as soon as males have contact with those already identified as masculine. For Buchbinder, in a variety of contexts, those men already established as masculine function as gatekeepers. A man is not seen as masculine until “other men confer it upon him.” (p.35)
relationship amongst men for acceptance creates hierarchies and competition.

However, it also emphasises that gender is performative.

This notion of gender as performative is a major focus of Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble: Feminism and Subversion of Identity*. Butler sees gender as a learned cultural-social set. Butler develops a theory of gender that seeks to explain the manner in which a subject’s identity is shaped while forming a claim that gender identity is not an expression of an essential core but rather the product of actions and behaviours. Butler contends that words, gestures, symbols, clothing and behaviours, as well as certain taboos, work to produce what is perceived as an essential masculine or feminine identity. Butler argues:

If gender attributes and acts, the various ways in which a body shows or produces its cultural signification, are performative, then there is no pre-existing identity by which an act or attribute might be measured; there would be no true or false, real or distorted acts of gender, and the postulation of a true gender identity would be revealed as a regulatory fiction. (1999, p.192)

Connell’s notion of practice and Butler’s notion of performative are distinct but mutually supportive. When Connell talks about the practice of masculinity he is talking about the method or system or “rules” that make masculinity hierarchical. Butler’s notion of gender as performative relates to how specific acts, or ways of physically being, have come to denote gender. Not all men are equal when it comes to their masculinity but, because the power of masculinity is bound up with a practice or performance, the opportunity exists for a man to renegotiate his position in the
patriarchal structure. This is not withstanding the fact that the constraints of the hierarchical system of men, which require recognition by gatekeepers, need to be taken into account. Such opportunity is not available to women, regardless of how well they perform hegemonic masculinity.

Connell’s work is not without critics. John MacInnes, in *The End of Masculinity: The Confusion of Sexual Genesis and Sexual Difference in Modern Society*, argues that while the objective of his work is to demonstrate that “masculinity does not exist as the property, character trait or aspect of identity of individuals,” (1998, p.2) Connell’s work “smuggles in the assumption that it is only men who possess masculinity, by collapsing ideology into identity on the basis of ideology. The only common feature of the diverse masculinities studied is that it is biological men who possess these gender identities.” (p.57) However, MacInnes does not seem to distinguish between practice and performance.

Connell stresses that gender is not fixed but determined by context, just as masculinity is not fixed. Masculinity is not only the property of men, but concepts of masculinity and femininity are produced by a patriarchal system in such a way that masculine characteristics cannot apply equally to men and women as this would void the hierarchical framework on which such a system is founded.

The focus in this exegesis is how masculinity is defined and promoted as a hetero-normative and exclusively male characteristic by dominant social institutions such as sport and film. This is not to say that women cannot perform equally as well, or better than men, in any given context. It is just that the term masculinity is unlikely to be used with the same celebratory endorsement when it comes to women who perform it, as we have seen, in recent years, when it comes to the US tennis player Serena Williams. Indeed, Connell’s articulation of the framework for the practice of
masculinity is crucial to identifying, understanding and subverting the masculine hegemony central to patriarchy because it provides a path to its deconstruction.

**Challenging patriarchy: The relationship between feminism and capitalism**

Feminism and capitalism provide key institutional challenges to patriarchy because they clearly undermine the authority of patriarchy and because they articulate a path to systemic change. However, these challenges come in different forms and with different agendas, which this chapter will now further explore. It will also further address the relationship between them.

The Second World War was pivotal to feminism. As Kathleen A. Laughlin and Jacqueline L. Castledine argue in *Breaking the Wave: Women, Their Organisations and Feminism, 1945-1985*, “not only did the war contribute to increasing memberships of women’s organisations as locations for service on the home front, it raised expectations among women that opportunities for public engagement and employment would continue to be available.” (2011, p.4) However, Laughlin and Castledine also contend that feminism is wrongly perceived to have been crafted around specific periods in time that often correlate with other movements, such as anti-war movements or movements supporting the end of racial segregation. In addition, Laughlin and Castledine see a danger in discussing feminism in terms of first-wave, second-wave and so on because it too often homogenises feminism in those periods, robbing it of its complex and differentiated objectives. In particular, to talk of feminism in terms of waves suggests that the objectives of mainstream feminism, as Laughlin and Castledine argue, are predominately white
hetero-normative and middle-class. Instead, Laughlin and Castledine offer several examples of feminist movements, at a macro and microscopic level, asserting that the notion of a “wave” does not adequately recognise the work and objectives of women from minority backgrounds or lesbian women. “A focus on ‘crests’ of activism created by large, centralized, national movements has marginalized smaller, regional, and local movements that quietly persist during seeming ‘troughs’ of inactivity.” (p.247) They suggest that “feminism” and “activism” are more useful terms because challenges to patriarchy are not limited to specific places, people and times, but are constant, daily events that are experienced differently by different women.

Nevertheless, the work of the so-called second wave feminists after the Second World War cannot be overlooked in trying to understand the shift from private to public patriarchy (in Walby’s terms) and in seeing how feminism and capitalism historically intersected to unsettle traditional patriarchy. In the landmark 1949 feminist text *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir advances the idea of women as “other”, that is of women as culturally constructed in ways that are distinctly different to men. She contends that men claimed the category of “Self” and to make clear the hierarchical nature of gender relations then viewed women as other. Further de Beauvoir sees cultural institutions as reflections of patriarchal notions, so that their ideas and beliefs reinforce this notion that “woman is defined exclusively in her relation to man.” (1983, p.174) However, de Beauvoir believes there is opportunity to change this situation if women can recognise their conditions, understand how they are constructed as other, and work for economic independence from men.

The notion of women as culturally constructed and as “other” in relation to men was further advocated in other writings such as Betty Friedan’s 1963 *The Feminine Mystique*. Friedan’s work is premised on a 1957 survey she conducted with
her college classmates fifteen years after graduation. Friedan articulates the restlessness and frustration felt by many women who saw themselves as restricted and trapped by pervasive “public” patriarchal institutions that provided them limited mobility and identity. Notably, Friedan sees the media as a particularly pervasive patriarchal institution striving to keep woman as wives, mothers and homemakers. She saw that women believed there was a danger for women in rejecting such definitions because they risked being stripped of identity, of function, and of being ostracised socially and culturally.

It is easy to see the concrete details that trap the suburban housewife, the continual demands on her time. But the chains that bind her in her trap are chains of her own mind and spirit. They are chains made up of mistaken ideas and misinterpreted facts, of incomplete truths and unreal choices. (1971, p.31)

In this way Friedan envisioned the opportunity for women to liberate themselves through full participation in society, but without identifying the need for systemic change in pervasive patriarchal institutions. However, she did see that such participation would eventually lead to a change in gender relations that would be liberating for both sexes.

Kate Millett’s *Sexual Politics*, first published in 1970, unlike de Beauvoir’s and Friedan’s earlier work, understands that systemic change is needed. For Millet, one can be aware of the manner in which a patriarchal social system functions so that it can be better navigated, but systemic change that redefines notions of masculine and feminine does not come from engaging with such a system. Millet also recognises the
pervasiveness of that system: “patriarchy as an institution is a social constant so deeply entrenched as to run through all other political, social and economic forms, whether of caste or class, feudality or bureaucracy.” (1990, p. 25)

De Beauvoir, before Millett, has focussed on the particular role of religion as a patriarchal system that had long offered women reward for their subservience. For de Beauvoir religion had played a pivotal role in the subjugation of women over time, in part because it provided the illusion of recognition.

Woman is asked in the name of God, not so much to accept her inferiority as to believe that, thanks to Him, she is the equal of the lordly male; even the temptation to revolt is suppressed by the claim that the injustice is overcome. Woman is no longer denied transcendence, since she is to consecrate her immanence to God; the worth of souls is to be weighed only in heaven and not according to their accomplishments on earth. (1983, p.633)

Because of the moral and divine context, the consequences for questioning or rebelling against such an institution were consequences that could be not only of an immediate nature but also of an eternal nature. The destabilisation of core patriarchal structures, such as religion, by “second-wave” feminists began to limit their ability to disseminate patriarchal ideology.

Capitalism also worked to undermine the institutions of patriarchy after the Second World War, but not with the same agenda or through the same methods as feminism.
As theorists such as Walby and Mies have indicated, the institutions that promote capitalism also promote patriarchy (although this is open to change). However, the institutions that promote patriarchy do not necessarily promote capitalism. Indeed, this is a point of friction, as I have argued, that has led to social change, not because of an ideological clash but because of differing methods of implementation. The relationship between feminism and capitalism, however, requires further investigation and elaboration.

Anne E Cudd and Nancy Holmstrom in Capitalism, For and Against: A Feminist Debate, examine the relationship between feminism and capitalism. Cudd contends that capitalism, born out of the industrial revolution, has created the conditions that have begun to liberate women from patriarchy: “Capitalism initiated and continues to motivate a feminist political transformation of society from the oppressive patriarchy of the past to an enlightened freedom for women and men in the future.” (2011, p.38)

Cudd compares capitalist, communist/socialist and traditional systems in terms of life expectancy, infrastructure, and relative cultural freedoms of expression and movement. She concludes that capitalism has not only the highest standard of living but that it is also the only system that offers women the opportunity to bring about change. This can be achieved because capitalism is non-discriminative in terms of gender. The discrimination that occurs in capitalism is because capitalism is yet to emerge from the weight of patriarchy. “Patriarchy creates coercive background conditions for women, and thus patriarchy, not capitalism is to blame for women's exploitation under capitalism.” (p.112) Cudd believes that eventually an “enlightened capitalism” will emerge and that patriarchy will be, in capitalist countries, a thing of the past.
Nevertheless, Holmstrom contends that while capitalism has been beneficial for women, these benefits are far exceeded by its negative outcomes. Further, Holmstrom concedes that measuring capitalism by the apparent negative or positive effects it provides for women is troubled because women live in a variety of contexts and in a variety of classes. Holmstrom believes that capitalism will always be an unequal system because it has hierarchical needs and because the starting position, in terms of access to education, health care and employment, is different for different groups of people. “As capitalism is a global system, the problems cannot be solved merely by changes within nations, so one would have to imagine a global social welfare system, international labor laws, and so on.” (p.204). Holmstrom acknowledges that capitalism is “gender neutral” and that it has the potential to provide more opportunities for women, given that it does not rigidly dictate their position in the way that patriarchy does; it does not demand they marry, have children and support a husband with unpaid labour. However, Holmstrom points out that women are still predominately paid less than men and are still less likely than men to hold positions of power and influence in government or industry.

This chapter concurs with Holmstrom that capitalism provides the potential for a repositioning for women, but that, under patriarchy, it can function as a ruse to encourage ongoing and persistent participation. Capitalism verges on dismantling patriarchy so that men and women can both be exploited to the full extent of the market, but it remains profoundly implicated in patriarchal structures. Nevertheless, one might argue that those men for whom identity is reliant on unquestioned power and stable structures, such as those men Walby sees as belonging to private patriarchy, have found their identities in some cases destabilised.
In *Men and Masculinities: Key Themes and New Directions*, Stephen Whitehead considers the relationship between masculinity and materiality, and the potential outcomes of a transition in economic power and gender relations for men. He writes:

Caught in a vortex of gender, social and economic change, many men, particularly those lacking the necessary social or cultural capital to protect themselves from such changes, are increasingly denied respite in traditional relationships and the self-validation elicited by fraternalistic male breadwinner work patterns.

(2002, p.57)

Thus capitalism, while still privileging men, increasingly demands they also be active participants in remaining men. It asks that they move with market forces, which bring about a changing vision of masculinity that does not draw on traditional or historical precedents. Capitalism asks men to renegotiate the traditional masculine archetypes of patriarchy and their relations. There is even the potential for a version of masculinity that is shaped by commercial interests, which are not as limited as patriarchal interests, to become the standard. For instance, in an attempt to “rebrand” its product, professional Australian Football League players took part in the 2013 Midsumma Gay Pride march advocating an end to homophobia. Thus, to recall Connell’s terms, hegemonic masculinity was no longer to be implicated in subordinating or marginalizing other forms of masculinity but in supporting them. Such moments of transition have caused personal upheaval for individuals sustained by traditional ideas of masculinity within a rigid patriarchal system. Capitalism must
be transideological and flexible, given that its cornerstone is profit, but patriarchy is
driven by a less flexible ideology that can limit its capacity to adapt to change.

The Notion of Crisis

In *Studying Men and Masculinities*, David Buchbinder, addressing the
perceived “crisis” in masculinity frames the notion of a crisis as “a reaction to shifts
occurring structurally in the culture, shifts that affect the way people understand and
respond to notions of sex, sexuality, and gender” (2013, p.6). Buchbinder critiques
ideas, such as those put forward in Robert Bly’s *Iron John*, that envision a challenge
to traditional masculinity as problematic. He sees Bly’s approach that seeks to find a
meaningful understanding of masculinity in past myths and fairy tales as problematic.
Such an approach states an unwillingness to cede a dominant and powerful social and
political position. This chapter agrees with Buchbinder; however, the concern over a
reorganisation of traditional heteronormative masculinity and the potential acceptance
of previously marginalised groups is viewed as legitimately difficult and worth
engagement.

In response to the changed conditions of patriarchy Roger Horrocks’
*Masculinity in Crisis: Myths, Fantasies and Realities* contends that masculine identity
is facing a major crisis in Western culture because established or traditional versions
of masculinity are being increasingly scrutinised, critiqued and seen to be inadequate.
Consequently men are increasingly struggling to reconcile new social expectations
and traditional patriarchal social conditioning. Male identity is often splintered or
fragile. Significantly, Horrocks connects this crisis in masculinity with the rise of
capitalist or consumerist culture:
We might argue that in our culture one reason young males are so angry and destructive is not so much that they haven’t got any money, but that as persons they are devalued. They are seen purely as units of production. This fails to nourish the heart and the soul, and many men in our culture – including affluent ones – feel soulless and heartless. Their creativity is suffocated in dead-end jobs; their imaginations are curtailed by our blinkered education system. At least the hunter-warrior males in tribal societies have an authentic contact with nature, they experience the flow of energy in their own bodies, and they have a deep contact with myth and ritual. What do we have in comparison? Quiz-shows on TV, the occasional football match, drinking in the pub. Our culture is impoverished to an astonishing degree; it has been disembowelled, emptied out. The triumph of commodities, and the dominance of machines, has torn out the heart and soul of men. (1994, pp.58-59)

Horrocks is critical of capitalism and consumerism, and the ways in which they have begun to position men as passive. There is, in all that Horrocks is saying, a feeling that men have been denied something they have been promised, whether it be reward for hard work, or reward for living by a set of guidelines set out in a traditional
patriarchal discourse, which is notably based on “nature”. However, this position is egocentric.

Horrocks articulates a passionate and emotive argument, but the subtext is that challenging the patriarchal order is causing unreasonable harm to men. Ignoring the experience of women, he reinforces the patriarchal notion that men have more value; a male crisis needs to be addressed, because it is more important than any crisis that women historically may have faced.

In *Masculinities and Culture*, John Beynon focusses on the development of masculine identities in the latter half of the twentieth century and beyond via the development and proliferation of communication technologies.

Beynon states: “In the recent past the authority and dominance of men were simply accepted. It would appear that contemporary men have certainly lost rights (especially in the worlds of law, finance, politics and business) that they had previously enjoyed solely by virtue of their sex.” (2002, p.83) The phrase, “men have certainly lost rights”, is problematic because it suggests the inroads made by feminism have taken away something that naturally belongs to men. As with Horrocks, Beynon’s work does not overtly support traditional patriarchal ideas, but his phrasing is tainted at times with nostalgia for what could be termed a “simpler time.”

In this way critics such as Horrocks and Beynon might be seen as more dangerous than those who would reject feminism outright because they inadvertently give validity to the myth that there is some esoteric or biological need for men to dominate.

It is also the case, as Whitehead reminds us, that

men (particularly white, heterosexual, Anglo-Saxon men) control, directly or indirectly, most
of the world’s resources, capital, media, political
parties and corporations. It is difficult to imagine
this group in crisis. Though the idea of a crisis
can, paradoxically, be quite attractive for such
men. For it posits them as victims, thus offering
them a new form of validation and identity – as
wounded and now under threat. (2002, pp. 4-5)

In addition, the “crisis” that revolves from fear of change and a fear of loss, is a crisis
not for all men but for specific men. There is also the chance, as Eric Anderson
suggests in Inclusive Masculinity: The Changing Nature of Masculinities, for positive
systemic change for men to occur because of the challenge to patriarchy. Anderson
contends, for instance, that homophobia is on the decline in the Western world
because university-aged men are inclined to create an “inclusive masculinity” that is
not built on subjugating homosexuality.

Inclusive masculinity theory therefore highlights
that there will be social inclusion of the form of
masculinities that were once traditionally
marginalized by hegemonic masculinities.
Accordingly, inclusive masculinity theory
maintains that in such a zeitgeist, multiple
masculinities will proliferate with less hierarchy
of hegemony. There will also be an expansion of
acceptable heteromasculine behaviours. (2009,
pp.8-9)
However, such inclusiveness could be consolidation in a time of crisis. For real change to occur, women would need to be afforded the same opportunities.

The loud and frequent articulation of a crisis in masculinity, however, works against any emergent embrace of change. In *The Men from the Boys: Rites of Passage in Male America*, for example, Roy Raphael reiterates a path to the redemption of hegemonic masculinity through a return to “nature.” He examines the experience of “becoming a man” through a series of interviews with men, juxtaposing the modern condition of manhood with that found in primitive or traditional societies, which often had specific rituals that would be undertaken or performed to regulate and ensure manhood. Raphael envisions such rituals nostalgically:

> Without the aid of a formalized rite of passage, it is harder for a youth to be sure that he has actually changed from one state to another. His transition into manhood becomes more difficult—and it generally takes a longer period of time. In the absence of assumed ritual, the delineation between boyhood and manhood becomes obscured. (1988, p.15)

Raphael embraces the need for some type of ceremony, some ordeal or experience that provides a clear distinction between the boy and the man, to help individual men achieve growth. The purpose seems to be to establish a rigid and hierarchal system of masculine identity in which the newly labelled man can identify himself in relation to others: those men who are like him and those who are not. Such
a move maintains the patriarchal social system under the guise of facilitating an individual’s desire to articulate a mature sense of self.

It is the contention of this exegesis that the crisis for men brought about by capitalism and feminism, and the ability of men to find a space to celebrate and reinforce their notions of superiority, are resolved for patriarchy to some degree by incorporating initiation into established discourses and practices such as film viewing and sports, either via active or passive engagement. The next chapter of the exegesis will examine the Western film genre as key to articulations of hegemonic masculinity and its crises. It will focus on a film, John Ford’s *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*, which explores a crisis in traditional masculine role models brought by social change. The third chapter will investigate the role of sport in sustaining nostalgic and hegemonic models of masculinity in a time of social change, with a focus on the film *Field of Dreams*. 
2. The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance

This chapter is focussed on the Western film genre, specifically the 1962 John Ford film *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*. The film begins with the aged Senator Ransome Stoddard and his wife Hallie returning to the town of Shinbone for the funeral of Tom Doniphon. Harassed by the *Shinbone Star* newspaper editor, Maxwell Scott, who is eager to know what connection the famous Senator has with the relatively unknown Doniphon, Stoddard recounts his first arrival in Shinbone and his efforts to bring statehood to the then territory. In flashback sequences he recalls events from decades earlier, but most importantly he reveals at the film’s conclusion that although he had long been credited with the shooting of the notorious Liberty Valance, an event that served as the foundation for his career, it was actually Doniphon who killed Valance. After the death of Valance, Stoddard had left Shinbone for Washington, taking Doniphon’s intended, Hallie, with him and marrying her. Scott rejects Stoddard’s story as he sees it as undermining necessary myths about the West.

It is the contention of this chapter that Western films, as depictions of nineteenth century American history, seek to construct a version of the past that endorses traditional heteronormative patriarchal hierarchies. As many critics have suggested, Westerns, via mythopoeia, commonly seek to mask the process of colonisation and legitimise as natural and necessary the organisation of society into exclusionary hierarchies.

In the post-World War II era the Western film genre, like the hegemonic masculinity it glorified, faced increasing scrutiny and criticism. As I outlined in the
previous chapter, political and social change gave increasing prominence to previously marginalised groups that challenged the authority and necessity of patriarchal hierarchies and ideologies. This chapter argues that, as a notable example of the post-War Western, *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* responds to this scrutiny and criticism by mythopoeically depicting a moment in time when social change occurred in the wilderness frontier, in the form of a bureaucratic capitalism that reshapes masculine identity. *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* presents the agent of this change as fundamentally flawed, narcissistic, manipulative, and lacking the positive personal and societal qualities of the traditional frontiersman. The film thus seeks to create and promote nostalgia for traditional patriarchal hierarchies and, in particular, a hegemonic mode of masculinity revealed as Christ-like in its masochism.

The first section of this chapter provides an overview of the Western genre and the context in which its mythologising function was established at the beginning of the twentieth century. It also accounts for thematic shifts in the genre in the post-World War II era, focussing on the role of John Ford as actively trying to reshape the American past to maintain a mythology he thought necessary to its future. The next section clarifies the two versions of masculinity within the film that it names, after the work of David Greven, as masochistic and narcissistic. This is followed by an examination of what defines a Western hero by looking at how social forces challenge and reshape the hero. The following section dissects the construction of masochistic masculinity in the film and sees the film as also providing social and political commentary. The final section looks at the narcissistic mode of masculinity and the ways the film critiques and condemns it.
The Western and John Ford

The Western film genre has its roots in a mythology premised on the nineteenth century notion of Manifest Destiny. This notion, specific to the United States, promoted the belief that American people and American society, established by European settlers and consolidated in the Revolutionary War, were endowed with special, vaguely defined, qualities and purpose. These qualities were seen as ordained by a Christian God and as inevitably leading to the spread of American society over the vast North American continent throughout the nineteenth century. It is in this mythopoeic framework that the violent colonisation of the West must be understood.

In 1893, at a meeting of the American Historical Association, Frederick Jackson Turner presented an essay called “The Significance of the Frontier in American History” which is widely regarded as providing new direction and perspective on the foundations of American character and experience. According to Stephen McVeigh in The American Western, Turner’s work set about recasting “the firmly established notions that the structures and institutions of American civilization had their origins in Europe.” (2007, pp.1-2) Turner, for McVeigh, is one of a group of writers who ensured that the “mythology of the West which emerged at the beginning of the twentieth century did not appear organically or naturally. Rather the mythology was deliberately constructed to serve a purpose.” (p. 13) McVeigh names Theodore Roosevelt’s four volume collection The Winning of the West published between 1889 and 1896, and later Roosevelt’s presidency 1901-1909, as similarly vital to the promotion of the mythology of the West. McVeigh believes that through Roosevelt and other writers such as Turner, “the West was becoming a set of symbols that constituted, not history, but an explanation of history, and in that sense a myth.”
This myth, premised on an interpretation of how the West had been settled, amounted to little more than a justification and a glorification of white colonisation and colonisers. However, the mythology glorifying colonial expansion was also inherently patriarchal, encoding patriarchal hierarchies into the real and imagined past.

The emergence of film as a popular entertainment and form of storytelling provided a medium to further develop such national myths, with the Western genre quickly emerging as a popular cinematic form and repeatedly embodying the American myth of Manifest Destiny. Brian Baker, in *Masculinity in Fiction and Film: Representing Men in Popular Genres 1945-2000*, contends that a given society promotes its fundamental doctrines through “key films” that “encode the critical connection between the ideology of the nation-state and the ideologically sanctioned form of masculinity at the time.” (2006, p.vii) This chapter agrees with Baker. The Western film genre allows for the promotion and sustenance of the myth that conveys ideas of Manifest Destiny and American exceptionalism. It is also an argument of this chapter that film genres, in particular the post-World War II Western, provide a refuge for modes of masculinity facing sustained criticism.

In the early decades of the twentieth-century, Westerns were predominately B features, low-budget films that featured unknown actors, made to screen after the main feature. In the 1930s and 1940s Westerns became more critically and commercially successful. However, they often employed generic settings and characters, allowing the hero to exist in the wilderness and in the civilised towns and cities. The coexistence of the untamed wilderness with civilised towns and cities gave the hero freedom and choice to shift between the two as he felt appropriate, and there was no questioning of the hero’s agency. Politically, this allowed the hero to live by
his own set of rules and beliefs in the wilderness and then abide, often begrudgingly, by civilised law when in town. Often the hero only came into town to provide support in defeating a villain that threatened the existence of the town, such as in John Ford’s 1946 film *My Darling Clementine*.

However, a significant shift surfaces in the structure of Westerns in the mid-to-late 1940s that increasingly reshapes the genre. In the wake of World War II and the emergence of the nuclear age, an uncertainty arises in the Western in regards to the validity of Manifest Destiny and the process of civilisation. The contention here is that this shift in post-war Westerns coincides not only with an uncertain military and ideological security for the United States, but also with a growing critique and challenge to the patriarchal assumptions that governed social and political relationships in the pre-war era. It also coincides with the emergence of a more receptive mainstream political and social position in regards to civil rights for native and black Americans, and with the introduction of new laws enforcing those civil rights. With such social change comes a revision of the nationalist myth presented in the Western as a history that provided a way forward, politically and socially speaking.

It is the argument of this chapter that this reshaping of the Western genre increasingly marginalised and threatened the distinct hegemonic masculinity that the genre had established. Such a shift is apparent in the Westerns of John Ford.

Spittles, Ford “was fascinated, even obsessed, by North America’s past, because that is where the present came from.” However, as Spittles also notes, “history is not simply a matter of facts, it is a question of interpretation, and reinterpretation.” (2014, p.72) This point lies at the heart of this chapter, which considers Ford’s mythopoeic engagement with the history of America’s West, particularly in terms of its mythologisation of patriarchal ideology.

Joseph McBride suggests, in *Searching for John Ford*, that Ford “retreated extensively into the American past to seek historical or mythic answers to the problems that troubled him in the present.” (2011, p.418). This seems particularly true of the post-World War II period where Ford seemed to perceive a lack of integrity in political and cultural institutions, which he saw as increasingly compromised and infused with narcissistic qualities. Ford himself was openly critical of McCarthyism and racial segregation. Tag Gallagher notes in *John Ford: The Man and His Films*, that Ford’s films increasingly “concern themselves with persistent heroes in increasingly malevolent worlds.” (1986, p. 348) Reconfiguring the past as he critiques the present, Ford promotes his mythologised version of the West as a place of greater integrity and value than the present. Ford understands, as Spurgeon argues, that “myths are not history. Myths are what we wish history had been—a compressed simplified, sometimes outright false vision of the past but a vision intended to serve a specific purpose in the present and, just as importantly, to bequeath a specific shape to the future.” (2005, p.3)

Ford shows, in particular, how the past was corrupted by an emerging narcissism that he ties to modern capitalism. His nostalgic rendering of the past and its heroes is premised on a patriarchal mythology associated with a masochistic masculinity, which promotes patriarchal imperatives at the same time as it laments
their inevitable misuse. Ford’s work in this period serves as an example of the friction between patriarchy and capitalism by highlighting the disruption capitalism causes to patriarchally embedded individuals and communities. This was also apparent in Ford’s film version of John Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath* (1940) and also in his adaptation of Robert Llewellyn’s novel *How Green Was My Valley* (1941). Neither is a Western but the negative impact of industrialisation and unfettered capitalism is a core theme in both films.

Ford, in other words, was knowingly involved in mythopoeia as a way of preserving what he saw as the crucial foundation narrative of American identity. As Richard Slotkin argues in *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America*, Ford asks that “for the sake of our political and social health we will behave as if we did not know the history whose truth would demystify our beliefs.” (1998, p.342) However, Ford’s mythic vision of the American past has undergone sustained criticism.

When it comes to *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*, the focus of this chapter, given the Cold War context in which the film was produced, and the growing presence and influence of social justice movements such as civil rights and feminism, it is hardly surprising that the text provides clear comment on political and social issues of the day.

Ford clearly recognises that society is in a perpetual state of flux. However, his work also demonstrates a belief in the need for a constant: an essential myth that serves as a foundation on which to premise beliefs and actions. Myth is, as Spurgeon notes, “the language through which a society remembers its history and attempts to understand its future.” (2005, pp.3-4) The essential Fordian myth, as articulated in *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*, is one that strongly endorses patriarchal
hierarchies and promotes the need for a hegemonic masculinity that is masochistic. It also cautions against what it sees as the corrupting force of capitalism.

**This town ain’t big enough for two hegemonic modes of masculinity**

*The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* is, as Arthur Redding notes in *Frontier Mythographies: Savagery and Civilization in Frederick Jackson Turner and John Ford*, “a drama of masculinity.” (2007, p.319) The film examines an historical juncture characterised by change: it is a text which examines the implications, on a personal level, of destabilising traditional patriarchal hierarchies in a pastoral economy through the emergence of a modern economy, or modern capitalism. This section of the chapter examines how that transition is framed as conflict between competing modes of masculinity.

Primarily the film focusses on Tom Doniphon the western pastoralist, played by John Wayne, and Ransome Stoddard the eastern idealist and reformist, played by James Stewart, who also functions as the narrator for a majority of the film. The presence of John Wayne and James Stewart in the roles of Doniphon and Stoddard is worth noting. Wayne, according to Lee Clark Mitchell in *Westerns: Making the Man in Fiction and Film*, is “perhaps America’s most important post-war symbol of masculinity (as Hollywood’s number one box office star from 1950 to 1965).” (1996, p.158) Wayne made over 200 films between 1926 and 1976, mostly Westerns, and at an imposing 6 feet 4 inches tall, broad shouldered with a solid build, he performed and embodied a hegemonic masculinity founded on action rather than words, physical dominance, heroic sacrifice and a willingness to follow his own moral code. In *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* he is displaced by Stewart, a star in his own right
known for playing idealistic, determined and good-natured characters in films such as *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* (1939) and *It's a Wonderful Life* (1946). In *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*, Stewart embodies an alternative hegemonic masculinity founded on formal education, law and order.

In “Contemporary Hollywood and the Double Protagonist Film” David Greven contends that from the late 1980s onwards “an unnamed genre exists.” (2009, p. 22) Greven refers to this genre as the “double-protagonist film.” He states that such a genre is defined by a “complex negotiation for power between two protagonists, each played by a star, both of whom lay legitimate claim to narrative dominance.” (p. 22) Greven sees this genre as emerging from, but also distinct from, what he terms the “buddy film genre,” where two established stars either work together to achieve a desired goal or function as binary opposites. For Greven, the double-protagonist film is an outcome of social forces challenging established notions of masculinity. The emergence of the double-protagonist film suggests that “manhood’s center cannot hold, that manhood is split, that the warring elements of manhood spill out beyond the individual subjectivity of the star protagonist, and that the burden of male representation must be carried by two stars rather than one” (p.23). Greven labels these two warring elements as narcissistic and masochistic modes of masculinity and sees the double-protagonist film as similar to the Ovidian myth of Narcissus and Echo. However, Greven sees Echo as male rather than female and “in a position of submission to the narcissistic lead.” Further, he states that “it is precisely by his relatively inferior, uncomfortable, resistant disposition that he allows the main protagonist to recognise, establish and maintain his dominance.” (p.31) This imbues the male Echo with masochistic qualities.
This chapter agrees with Greven that representations of manhood have been split into competing modes, but argues that such a split emerged not in the late 1980s but in the post-World War II era in John Ford’s *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*. Tom Doniphon champions the masochistic mode of masculinity and Ransome Stoddard embodies the narcissistic mode of masculinity.

This chapter will use Greven’s term “masochistic” to describe a traditional patriarchal heteronormative masculinity that embodies a determined self-reliance and a need to physically dominate other men and a contested space. The masochistic quality is highlighted by a willingness to endure physical and emotional loss rather than the surrender of this identity. This chapter will use Greven’s term “narcissistic” to describe an emerging mode of masculinity that offers a reformed version of traditional patriarchal hierarchies, which will bend to meet the needs of modern capitalism. The narcissistic quality is highlighted by its flexibility and willingness to compromise values and beliefs to achieve a desired outcome. Here there is a willingness to adapt and reorganise methods in order to maintain dominance.

Greven further contends that “the privileged form of masculinity to emerge from double-protagonist films is that of the male masochist.” (p. 43) This is certainly true of *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*, however, the contention here is that masochistic and narcissistic modes of masculinity function differently in different genres and that any clash between the two must be viewed within the context of a specific genre, indeed within a specific film. The Western genre, at different stages, celebrates the narcissistic hero, the masochistic hero and hybrid versions.

Interestingly, both versions of masculinity in the Western share important characteristics. Baker sees that a “kind of martial or violent masculinity is encoded as central to the mythic narrative of the frontier.” (2006, p.128) Both Stoddard and
Doniphon demonstrate a willingness to kill to achieve their desired aims. Both modes of masculinity also promote patriarchal concerns and hierarchies. However, there is a clear and important distinction to be made in terms of their social role.

Doniphon does not see himself as responsible for the well-being of others, such as those who are marginalised or subordinated by the traditional patriarchal hierarchies that he represents. If people are to improve their social or economic circumstances it will be under their own volition. However, neither does he provide an overt obstacle. So long as their actions do not interfere with him or his interests he is an affable and generous contributor to the Shinbone community.

By contrast, Stoddard works to garner support from those who, like him, are subordinated or marginalised by traditional patriarchal hierarchies. He promises systemic change: a de-gendering of social institutions, and upward social and economic mobility through education, law and order. Yet Stoddard asks those around him to provide support and facilitate his agenda. He wants Sheriff Link Appleyard to arrest the local thug Liberty Valance, something he is clearly incapable of doing and that would likely result in his death. He wants the town’s voting population to press for statehood.

Here Ford makes the distinction between the self-sufficient Doniphon and Stoddard, who requires the nurturing, support and sometimes the sacrifice of those around him. In *A Certain Tendency of Hollywood Cinema, 1930-1980*, Robert Ray states that the film not only highlights “their incompatibility,” but also “the necessity for choosing between them.” (1985, p. 236) Not only must characters such as Hallie choose between Doniphon and Stoddard but so too must the film’s audience. The competing modes of masculinity call for a reassessment of the Western hero.
The Western Hero

The identity of the hero is crucial in the Western, but this identity is shaped by context. David Lusted, in *The Western*, tracks the structural and thematic shifts that have occurred in the Western film genre throughout the twentieth-century (2003). He traces the Western’s movement through the phases of the silent era, the serial, the epic, the romance, the dystopian, the elegiac and the revisionist, and tracks how the Western hero, in each phase, develops and changes. The phases of the Western, Lusted shows, coincide with political and social periods occurring in the United States, and the Western hero is defined differently in different contexts and for different purposes. What remains consistent, however, is the gender of the Western hero, as the opportunity in the Western genre for heroism in the pre-postmodern age belongs exclusively to males. The hero is also always, to varying degrees, an agent of patriarchy.

There is no one definition that succinctly applies to the anointed hero in all Westerns. The definition is contextual although there are similarities between films produced in a particular period. In *Civilization and Its Discontents: The Self-Sufficient Western Hero*, Douglas Den Uyl sees in the Western hero a clear promotion of self-sufficiency or self-reliance as the desired moral and national virtues. He states that heroes in Westerns “evoke this sense of standing apart from, and above, ordinary men and women.” (2010, p.31) This definition is tethered to ideas of American exceptionalism present in Manifest Destiny and to the promotion of a unique American identity, as espoused in works such as Turner’s essay.

Den Uyl further argues that “the western hero is in the service of some good,” such as “securing justice” or “protecting the weak.” Interestingly Den Uyl sees these
characteristics present even in many of the so-called antiheroes of revisionary Westerns such as the character William Munny from Clint Eastwood’s 1992 film *Unforgiven*, stating that such antiheroes, are “generally in the service of some overarching moral good.” (p.38) This example needs comment. *Unforgiven* follows a retired and reformed bounty hunter, Munny, played by Eastwood, and his partner as they come out of retirement. They take a job avenging a prostitute whose face was slashed by a customer she displeased. When Munny’s partner is killed he seeks revenge on the local sheriff and his associates. In the moments before the final shootout the sheriff says to Munny, “You’d be William Munny out of Missouri. You killed women and children.” Munny responds: “That’s right. I’ve killed women and children; killed everything that walks or crawls at one time or another. And I’m here to kill you.” In the following shootout Munny keeps his promise. Certainly the sheriff was presented as a hardliner, but he was fairly elected in the service of keeping guns out of his town and maintaining a stable environment for its inhabitants. Thus the moral good that Munny’s actions serve are to himself rather than the community that is now without a law enforcement department. This positions him as a narcissistic hero and demonstrates the fluidity of the hero.

Den Uyl’s definition of the Western hero is problematic but serves to highlight the complexities within the hero that are also present in *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*. In *Criticisms and the Western*, Douglas Pye states “the handling of generic conventions became increasingly complex in the post-World War II period; tensions inherent in the tradition surfaced more explicitly, notably around the identity and agency of the hero.” (1995, p.66) Indeed, Laura Mulvey argues that there is a “splitting of the Western hero into two” (p.34). The split, according to Mulvey, has two functions for the viewer: it allows for “celebrating integration into society
through marriage” but it also allows for the “celebrating of “resistance to social
demands and responsibilities, above all marriage.” (p.34) This is seen in the John Ford
masterpiece The Searchers. At the conclusion of the film, having rescued his niece
from the Comanche after a decade long search, Ethan Edwards (John Wayne) refuses
the implied invitation to leave the frontier. However, his partner Martin Pawley
(Jefferey Hunter) takes the hand of his betrothed Laurie and embraces marriage.
Mulvey uses a Freudian framework to discuss integration as resolving the Oedipal
complex and resistance to civilisation as a “nostalgic celebration of the phallic.”
(2009, p.34) Mulvey’s definition of the Western hero certainly has application in the
Westerns where the wilderness and civilisation coexist and the hero can shift between
the two as he feels appropriate. However, it fails to address the complications in many
post-war Westerns.

Ray notes how increasingly in post-war films the wilderness and the frontier
can no longer exist with civilisation. The hero has to choose between the two. “An
awareness of the tragedy involved in the loss of the American wilderness was a post-
war innovation in the western, a form whose previous optimism had rested on the
assumption of an unendingly progressive future whose merit would justify the
historical sacrifice.” (1985, p.238) In this context the Western hero, still occupying
the wilderness, is increasingly seen as problematic. Rarely do Westerns documenting
the Western hero’s reluctance to give up the wilderness see the marginalisation of the
Western hero as reasonable or even beneficial. They do so with a nostalgia suggesting
that the Western hero symbolised a better way of living and has fallen victim to the
sinister forces of modernisation and progress. Film such as George Roy Hill’s Butch
Cassidy and the Sundance Kid (1969) and Sam Peckinpah’s Pat Garrett and Billy the
Kid (1973) lament the loss of the wilderness hero. The “tragedy involved in the loss of
the American wilderness,” as Ray terms it, is essentially a lament in response to the emergent critiques of feminism and post-colonialism, which challenged the heroic white coloniser that Roosevelt and others had worked so hard to legitimise and that had previously been so readily accepted and celebrated.

What the pre-war and post-war Western manifestations of the hero have in common is that they are, to borrow from Emile Durkheim, “moral individualists.” This type derives from Durkheim’s theorisation of how a society is formed and how shared or mutual consciousness is developed. For Durkheim, solidarity amongst members is crucial to maintaining a society, but the methods by which social solidarity is maintained change as a society becomes more modern. He describes this transition as a shift from mechanical solidarity to organic solidarity. According to Durkheim, mechanical solidarity is characteristic of so-called primitive societies where social cohesion is maintained because of closely shared spaces and tasks within the group. Durkheim focusses on the influence of religion in these contexts, arguing that “nearly all the great social institutions have been born in religion” and that “the idea of society is the soul of religion.” (1973, p.191) Organic solidarity, by comparison, is something Durkheim associates with modern societies, where labour tasks are more diverse, and people do not share the same spaces. There are distinct groups within the society that do not necessarily interact, but solidarity is maintained because of a recognised interdependence of labour tasks.

The transition that Durkheim describes shares similarities with the settling of the mythic frontier as it is presented in the Western genre. Westerns that allow for the coexistence of the wilderness and civilisation are akin to Durkheim’s primitive societies. The Western hero in this context embodies the shared beliefs and values in the primitive group and behaves, as Den Uyl suggests, in a way that promotes a social
good. Those Westerns where there is conflict between the wilderness and the frontier are those akin to the early stages of Durkheim’s more modern societies. The Western hero in this context, in terms of his actions and ideologies, is antiquated and this can lead to his marginalisation.

Durkheim saw that the formal and ritualised religion of primitive societies would be replaced by what he called the “moral individualism” of modern societies, characterizing that “moral individualism” as a “religion in which man is at one the worshipper and the god.” (p.46). Moral individualists effectively worship their own freedoms and opportunities, and the freedoms and opportunities of their peers. Whereas such neo-liberal beliefs have come to dominate the political landscape, for Durkheim “a more fully developed individualism is indispensable,” which is not “the antagonist of Christian morality” (p. 53) but a continuation of it, adapted to a changing context. If we look at the development of the Western in Durkheim’s terms, the Western hero is increasingly the god more than the worshipper, which positions him more and more as the antithesis of civilization.

As noted, Westerns produced in the pre-World War II period, and the decade after, allow for the coexistence of the wilderness and civilization, and they typically contain a hero who works for the betterment of society. Lusted describes this hero as a romance hero who “will represent a higher order of morality, justice and social purpose.” (2003, p.151) He is someone who is more a worshipper than a god. This is apparent in George Stevens’s 1953 film Shane, in which the gunfighter Shane briefly becomes part of an isolated Wyoming farming community. The homesteaders that Shane sides with are being bullied by a cattle baron and his hired thugs. This eventually leads to a shootout in which the cattle baron and his thugs are dispatched by Shane. Shane then rides back into the wilderness, after some parting words for the
child who admires him: “Joey, there’s no living with, with the killing,” which is like a brand. Shane is thus presented as a moral and socializing force, who feels regret even as his killing of the cattle baron brings peace to the valley. Shane struggles to deal with the killing he does, labelling it as akin to the mark the Christian god placed on Cain for killing his brother Abel. Shane’s social good is thus only achieved through sacrifice.

By contrast, Quentin Tarantino’s 2012 Western *Django Unchained*, like Eastwood’s earlier revisionary Western, is very much an example of the socially unfettered moral individualist. The film follows the exploits of Dr. King Schultz and a slave, Django, whom he frees and then partners with in bounty hunting. The two dispatch wanted lawbreakers with ease and precision. When they encounter slave traders and plantation owners they do the same. These moral individualists make a living by ridding society of criminals and of those they find morally objectionable. They have become gods. Unlike Shane they are untroubled by their lifestyle and the killings it involves. These revisionist Western heroes reject the feminization of the hero, the Ransome Stoddard type, brought about by capitalism and feminism. They work to reestablish and celebrate the frontier where the Western hero can once again roam without challenge from marginalized groups.

**The Fordian Hero: the Masochistic Male**

to engage with the mythical frontier he worked so hard to create and make a concluding statement on the Fordian hero saga. Although this was not Ford’s last Western, it was the last Western he made independently that continued the journey of the Fordian hero; he co-directed the 1962 film *How the West Was Won*. Ford’s last Western was *Cheyenne Autumn* which deals with the mistreatment of the Cheyenne people by the US Government. There is indeed a connection between Ford’s Western heroes, but there is little revision of that masculine archetype apparent in *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*. The Fordian hero in the film continues to embody the essential myth that Ford seeks to promote. Gallagher states that Ford’s films promote a specific kind of hero, that he labels a Fordian hero. Gallagher summarises this archetype as follows; “the Fordian hero, perceiving that myths (even defective) are necessary to sustain us, seeks to mediate between myth (repressive order) and reality (chaos), in order, by purifying myth, to revitalize society.” (1986, p.479) Further, Gallagher believes that the Fordian hero “must be willing to act, to intervene, to assume authority over others.” As a consequence the Fordian hero “is almost always celibate, almost never “gets the girl,”” and “seldom reaps life’s humble pleasures.” Gallagher sees the Fordian hero as embodying a Christian ethos, “fully conscious that his redemptive acts will, like Christ, efface, condemn, even destroy him.” (pp. 479-480) This chapter concurs with Gallagher and argues that the Fordian hero is distinctly masochistic. The Fordian hero is also a determined moral individualist, both God and worshipper, willing to stand outside or within, but never against, civilization. It also argues that the context of Ford’s films, in terms of production and setting, gradually shift, so that the actions and outcomes for a Fordian hero differ in different Ford Westerns.
In *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* there are two distinct heroes: Tom Doniphon is the hero, for the viewer. Yet, for the community of Shinbone, Ransome Stoddard is the hero. The film thus highlights the vulnerability and complexity of the Western hero. The hero can be the narcissist or the masochist, and his success can be public, involving positive recognition, or personal and private. However, when it comes to *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*, as noted, Ford resoundingly celebrates Doniphon and shames Stoddard. Yet he also recognises that Stoddard is necessary for the perpetuation of the Western hero.

The distinction between Doniphon and Stoddard is highlighted when Doniphon explains to Stoddard how Shinbone functions: “I know those law books mean a lot to you, but not out here. Out here a man settles his own problems.” This notion of individual law is one with which Stoddard struggles, wedded as he is to the formal rules and regulations that are set out and administered by social institutions. Stoddard, in effect, defines and positions himself in Shinbone as the antithesis of moral individualism which he sees as unfair, unreasonable and dangerous.

Ford, however, complicates Stoddard’s vision of the moral individualist. The film highlights the courageous sacrifice of the hero Doniphon and the necessary function he serves in ironically bringing about civilization. Ford positions him as an unrecognized Christ-like figure, suggesting that, as Darby puts it, “written history often ignores, or never even recognises, the true agents of social change.” (1996, p.172) For Ford the “true agents of social change” are those like Doniphon; Stoddard is just the beneficiary. As Ralph Brauer argues, in Ford’s mythopoeic Western, “politicians, bureaucrats, and business have no traditions, no etiquette, no legends to carry forward because they are subversive of those values.” (1977, p.78) This makes it impossible for Stoddard, the bureaucrat, to claim the position of hero through
anything other than dishonest means. Doniphon is the hero, and Stoddard is a ploy, a narcissistic fraud.

Ford works to evoke audience sympathies for Doniphon by revealing his willingness to sacrifice his own happiness for the woman he loves. Ford also positions Doniphon as active, self-reliant, cordial and hard working. Doniphon’s loss and anonymity is made more significant because Ford identifies him as the hero and because he is played by John Wayne, an actor audiences were accustomed to seeing as the hero.

Politically, however, Ford offers a troubling picture of democracy. In the film Doniphon is the dominant, yet benevolent, half of an informal oligarchy. The other half of the informal oligarchy is the malevolent Liberty Valance. They rule over Shinbone unchallenged. J.A Place argues in *The Western Films of John Ford* that “they are bound inextricably in their power-based approach to law, and the only difference between them is moral.” (1974, p.226) Valance, however, seems more attuned than Doniphon to the threat Stoddard represents. That threat, for Valance and for Doniphon, is a reconfiguration of class and gender hierarchies, and a redefining of what constitutes hegemonic masculinity. Stoddard threatens to replace the crude oligarchy with civilisation founded on democracy.

This is apparent when Stoddard starts a school in the back room of the Shinbone Star Newspaper. The student body is made up of Hallie, Pompey, several older men, and Mexican children. The class is almost entirely comprised of marginalised groups that have come so that Stoddard can share his knowledge and skills, his power, with them. Stoddard asks the class: “Now I wonder if anybody remembers what the basic law of the land is called? Now you remember that I told you it had to be added to and changed from time to time by things called
amendments.” Pompey attempts to answer: “That… that…” Stoddard finishes the sentence for him: “That all men are created equal.” Again, given the makeup of the class and the lesson Stoddard has chosen, there is inference that equality is at hand. However, later, when Stoddard is at a town meeting to elect two delegates to the territorial convention for statehood, it becomes apparent that the earlier notion of equality is no longer applicable. Pompey sits outside the meeting, with Ford highlighting the hypocrisy of Stoddard’s claims, the contradiction between his words and his actions. At the very least, the film suggests, the masculine power exercised by Doniphon and Valance was not based on dissimulation; indeed, it was bound by a more reliable moral code of its own.

Ford highlights, as John Baxter argues in *The Cinema of John Ford*, that “civilisation, though inevitable, destroys everything honest and good in frontier life, including the reliance on a balance of force among equals and the concept of a simple community based on a rightful subservience to greater power.” (1971, p.165) The Doniphon/Valance oligarchy also serves as a Cold War parable. Doniphon is the United States and Valance is the Soviet Union; both are powerful and also capable of cataclysmic destruction. Valance is essential to Doniphon’s identity, transforming the potential for violence that he represents into something necessary. Doniphon is seemingly all that stands between relative peace and a Valance dictatorship in Shinbone. *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* was released several months before the Cuban Missile Crisis that pushed the United States and the Soviet Union to the edge of nuclear catastrophe. The United States and the Soviet Union postured and threatened each other but ultimately understood that war would devastate both of them, so they avoided direct conflict. Each country was thus able to define itself by its opposition to the other. In *The Invention of the Western Film: A Cultural History of*
Scott Simmon argues “The Western doesn’t exactly dispute the value of ‘democracy’—the word itself is too sacred for that—but it redefines it in unrecognizable terms until it becomes a synonym for leadership by the superior man.” (2003, p.136) Ford sees Doniphon as the superior man, demonstrated by his ability, exercised or not, to prevent Valance’s tyranny, just as the United States prevented the tyranny of the Soviet Union.

There is also a dichotomy at play in the way the film positions Tom Doniphon and Liberty Valance. Doniphon should be the hero and Valance the villain. Doniphon, already established in Shinbone as a rancher, is in the process of adding an extra room to his house to accommodate Hallie, the girl he presumes he will marry. Thus Doniphon is part of the way towards fulfilling what Martin Pumphrey sees as the dominant Western narrative: he has almost become “civilized” through his winning of a woman. Pumphrey argues:

the Western has coded civilisation and
wilderness in gendered terms. The town that
stands for the social order that the hero must save
and then settle down into or reject and leave is
characterised not simply by the presence of a
railway station, saloon, barber’s shop and hotel,
by bankers, marshals and traders, but essentially
by the presence of women. (1995, p.52)

Doniphon, however, has not entirely put the masculine wilderness behind him. Valance, who occasionally ventures into Shinbone, is wary of confrontation with Doniphon. Doniphon articulates his relationship with Valance for Stoddard thus: “Liberty Valance’s toughest man south of the picketwire, next to me.” Indeed, the
only scene in the film where we see Valance consider challenging Doniphon is at Peter’s Place—Home Cooking, and it results in Valance backing down and briefly leaving town. Highlighting Doniphon’s masochistic nature, it is also the case that at no point does Doniphon openly or directly oppose Stoddard, despite the apparent ease with which he could physically overpower him. In this way Doniphon, bound by the moral code that limits the contexts in which he can challenge and overcome Stoddard, is compliant in his own downfall.

When outlining to Shinbone residents the need for statehood, which would bring the law and order he desires, Stoddard announces: “statehood means the protection of our farms and our fences. It means schools for our children and it means progress for the future.” The repetition of the attributive adjective “our” demonstrates that, for Stoddard, the struggle is not his alone but the struggle of all those subordinated and marginalised and repressed under the Doniphon and Valance oligarchy. Thus Stoddard cannot vanquish Valance without also vanquishing Doniphon. However, Stoddard is physically incapable of achieving this alone. His rhetoric seeks to convince others that change will benefit them, attempting to align the desires and beliefs of the wider community with his own, but they are premised on dishonesty and hypocrisy. The only farm and fences that are seen in the film belong to Doniphon and he takes care of them himself.

However, Doniphon does nothing to contest Stoddard’s rhetorical ploy. In fact, Doniphon supports Stoddard’s plan to bring statehood to the territory as a way to remove Stoddard from the town. When Stoddard nominates Doniphon to be a delegate to the territorial convention, claiming he is the only man with the “right qualifications,” Doniphon immediately rejects the nomination, making a point of walking over to Stoddard and looking him in the eyes, “I’ve got other plans. Personal
plans.” Once Stoddard receives a nomination, Doniphon seconds it. Doniphon’s insistence on the personal rather than the public is significant, as is his mention of “other plans,” which no doubt refers to Hallie.

Doniphon is also unable to prevent Stoddard’s seduction of his “intended”, Hallie. Doniphon bases his masculine identity and worth on Hallie’s desire and happiness so that Hallie’s eventual choice of Stoddard over Doniphon becomes instrumental to Doniphon’s downfall. Baker argues that “Hallie’s rejection of Doniphon is, ideologically, a rejection of the past, of the lawlessness and violence of the frontier and an embracing of the values of the East, of education and civic society.” (2006, p.132) It also signals a more feminine and narcissistic direction in terms of the type of masculinity that will now reign supreme. However, at the conclusion of the film, it is clear that Hallie has made the wrong choice, and it is to her detriment.

According to Place, “Tom loses Hallie, his future, and his power, not because he chooses to do so out of the goodness of his heart, but because he is enacting the ritual of progress, which destines that the old hero be destroyed so that the new can take his place.” (1974, p.226) Doniphon, however, is an unwilling participant in this ritual of progress. As the friendship between Stoddard and Hallie develops, Doniphon intervenes. He follows Stoddard when he goes out into the desert to practice shooting and then guides him to the ranch where Pompey and others are putting the finishing touches to an extension on Doniphon’s house. Doniphon clearly articulates his position: “I’m telling you that Hallie’s my girl. I’m building that brand new room and porch for her for when we get married.” Stoddard does not argue the point: “Well Tom, I guess everybody pretty much takes that for granted.” Doniphon is not convinced: “Everybody except Hallie, maybe you.” He is concerned that Hallie has
not yet reconciled herself to his traditional masculine authority and the position he has
given her as “his girl.” Doniphon is also looking for Stoddard to state his interest in
Hallie so that he can then challenge and defeat him. Stoddard’s cagy response leaves
Doniphon unable to act according to the terms of his moral code.

   It is Valance who ultimately intervenes, after he loses the vote to Stoddard to
represent Shinbone at the territorial convention, challenging Stoddard to a duel. When
Stoddard surprisingly accepts Valance’s challenge, Doniphon must ironically come to
his rescue, because his beloved Hallie asks him to. Doniphon kills Valance from the
shadows and allows Stoddard to take the credit. As Robert B. Pippin writes, Doniphon
“shoots him (Valance) down from a dark corner, violating every code of the West”
(2010, p. 80), his masculine code corrupted by the feminine. In eliminating Valance,
Doniphon ends the oligarchy of which he was part and is thus complicit in his own
removal from the narrative. As Douglas Pye comments, in relation to the character of
Liberty Valance, his “name itself is almost allegorical.” (1995, p. 119) Doniphon, in
shooting Valance, brings an end to the liberty that allowed him and Valance to exist
as they did. After the shootout when Doniphon realises he has lost Hallie to Stoddard,
he returns home to his ranch, drunk, and sets fire to it before collapsing into a chair.
He is ready to be consumed by the flames but is rescued by Pompey, only to
eventually suffer an ignominious death and burial.

   Interestingly, a number of critics seem to agree with Ford’s vision of
Doniphon as the tragic hero. Several critics describe Tom’s life in bleak and sorrowful
ways which serve to heighten the tragedy of his situation and also the heroic nature of
his masochism. Ralph Brauer contends that “Tom Doniphon, the real hero of The Man
Who Shot Liberty Valance, dies an anonymous pauper’s death, an anachronism like
the dusty old stagecoach that sits on blocks in the old livery stable where Tom lies in
a plain box, his boots stolen by the undertaker.” (1977, p.74) Baxter similarly reiterates Ford’s mythopoeic and nostalgic depiction of masochistic masculinity as tragically lost:

Doniphon has lived a meaningless life. As he lies dead in a crude pine box in a cluttered stable, his boots stolen by a thrift undertaker, he is attended initially only by his old slave Pompey and the deposed sheriff Link Appleyard, reminders, like the dusty and wheel-less coach also stored there, of the culture Stoddard’s relentless law and order has destroyed. (1971, p.167)

These critics are clearly responding to the message of *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* which clearly suggests that, with the passage of time, the narcissistic masculinity promoted by the modern economy will recognise its inadequacies and regret that it has subjugated and deprived the world of an authentic masochistic masculinity. This exegesis will now turn to an examination of the narcissistic model of masculinity associated with Stoddard and the ways in which this is continually represented as inferior to the masochistic masculinity of Doniphon.

**Narcissistic Masculinity**

Ford continually puts Stoddard into situations where his idealism and the values he promotes are unable to assert themselves without the support of others, most prominently Tom Doniphon. Stoddard’s success comes from the work of others, from
manipulation and coercion. Indeed, his reputation and career are founded on the heroic sacrifice of the masochistic mode of masculinity. This is something that Stoddard himself acknowledges at the beginning of the film, which already confronts us with Doniphon’s demise.

In this early scene, prior to the flashback that constitutes the majority of the film, Senator Stoddard and Hallie, along with the former sheriff Link Appleyard go to see the undertaker, Clute Dumfries, and visit Doniphon’s coffin. They see a plain looking wooden box that Dumfries tries to excuse: “The county’s gonna bury him, you know. Gosh. I ain’t gonna make a nickel out of it.” From this it seems that Doniphon was destitute, an almost anonymous member of the Shinbone community. Pompey, the only black character in the film, who spent most of his life as Doniphon’s servant, is seated next to the coffin. While Stoddard has presented himself as the champion of the marginalised, Pompey remains loyal to Doniphon, even in death. Notably, Hallie sits next to Pompey, re-joining the ranks of the marginalised, but Stoddard looks inside the coffin as if wanting to be certain that Doniphon is dead. “Where are his boots?” Stoddard demands. Dumfries awkwardly explains, “Well, I… they was an awful nice pair of boots, almost brand new, and I thought…” Not only was Doniphon destitute and seemingly unknown, in death he suffers the indignity of having his boots taken, presumably so Dumfries can turn a profit. Stoddard, aggrieved by the gesture instructs Dumfries, “Put his boots on Clute, and his gun belt and his spurs.” To this demand Appleyard responds, “He didn’t carry no handgun, Ranse. He didn’t for years.” This is suggestive of Doniphon’s emasculation, and it is an emasculation that seems to shame Stoddard. As Sue Matheson, in “John Ford on the Cold War: Stetsons and Cast Shadows in The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance,” writes, “Stoddard is incensed that Doniphon’s body is about to be buried without the
hieroglyphs of a Western hero.” (2012, p.361) Stoddard, at this point in his life, knows what has been lost in Doniphon and in the masochistic masculinity he embodied.

Afterwards, Stoddard concedes to the demands of the newspaper editor Maxwell Scott and agrees to tell Doniphon’s story. Notably, it is a story he tells away from Pompey, Appleyard and Hallie. He says, “Of course this story not only concerns me. Old Pompey in there, Link… they were part of it. But I suppose I’m the only one who can tell it through.” He thus assumes narrative dominance on a personal, communal and historical level.

Stoddard functioned as the catalyst for change, but the only real change is that he has displaced Doniphon as the hero in the narrative and established a new hegemonic masculinity that is narcissistic and without the moral code Doniphon promoted, it is reliant on bureaucracy. In speaking for Hallie and Pompey, the two most marginalised characters in the film, Stoddard shows that there is still a hierarchy in place that privileges his voice, the voice of the white male, over theirs. Certainly there has been economic development in Shinbone and the establishment of law and order, but this is aesthetic change or a change in process, rather than the promised alleviation of gender, race or class hierarchies.

The film’s representation of Stoddard makes clear where Ford’s sympathies lie. Stoddard’s story begins as he first heads towards Shinbone on a stagecoach. When the stagecoach is robbed by Liberty Valance and his gang, Stoddard confronts Valance over Valance’s theft of a lady’s brooch. Stoddard asks, “What kind of men are you?” Liberty responds: “This kind, dude.” He then knocks Stoddard to the ground and asks, “Now, what kind of man are you?” Stoddard replies: “I am an attorney at law, duly licensed by the territory.” The encounter immediately flags
competition of different kinds of masculinity as a thematic interest of the film. This encounter also highlights how, as Darby states, “once serious physical danger threatens, the tools of civilisation—education and the written law—are helpless and must be forgotten.” (1996, p.171)

This point is further exemplified when Valance searches Stoddard’s bag and finds his law books. He rips pages from the books and stands over Stoddard: “Lawyer, huh? I’ll teach you law… Western law.” He then beats Stoddard with a whip handle and leaves him on the side of the road. By Western law, Valance means the masculine law of action rather than the more effeminate law of paper, policy and word. Jane Tompkins, in *West of Everything: The Inner Life of Westerns*, argues that “the Western’s hostility to language refers to a mode of behaviour—masculine behaviour for the most part—that has left an indelible mark on the experience of practically every person who has lived in this country in the twentieth century.” (1992, p.58)

Tompkins is referring here to the masochistic mode which promotes action over words.

After Doniphon rescues Stoddard from the Valance beating, he advises him: “I know these law books mean a lot to you, but not out here. Out here a man settles his own problems.” Stoddard responds: “Do you know what you’re saying to me? You know, you’re saying just exactly what Liberty Valance said.” The parallel between Doniphon and Valance is astute. However, Stoddard’s observation also identifies himself as ideologically opposed to Doniphon. Place, articulating the ideology of the film, which supports the “moral individualist” Doniphon, describes the difference between Doniphon and Stoddard in the following terms: “he [Tom] is capable of carrying the responsibility for all he does. Ranse is not, and he continually needs a law or some other justification. The very fact that Tom solves his own problems is
justification enough for him.” (1974, p. 225) Both Doniphon and Valance have offered Stoddard advice, in different ways, as to the legitimacy of his approach, but Stoddard, believing law and order to be superior to what Doniphon and Valance offer, will not listen.

The narcissism and femininity of Stoddard’s position is strongly signalled by Hallie’s support. Unlike Doniphon and Valance, she sees worth in Stoddard’s position: “A little law and order around Shinbone wouldn’t hurt anyone.” However, “a little law and order” lays the foundation for significant social change that will redefine social norms and relationships in the community; indeed, it will bring a type of revolution that will, according to the film, cause significant and ongoing pain to nearly everyone in Shinbone.

Indeed, Stoddard and Hallie are aligned continuously throughout the film. Douglas Pye, commenting on the feminised masculinity of Stoddard, argues: “For much of the film, too, he (Ranse) wears an apron and waits at tables—a job explicitly seen in western terms as unmanly.” (1995, p.122) When Stoddard is working at Peter’s Place—Home Cooking, washing dishes, Pete asks Stoddard to wait tables. Nora and Hallie challenge the idea. Nora states, “washing dishes is enough for him.” Hallie follows with, “Who ever heard of a man waiting tables?” For Nora and Hallie, Stoddard would clearly be demeaned by undertaking “women’s work.” However, Stoddard does not agree and finds no negative implications in such work. This suggests to Hallie and Nora, and others, that Stoddard will bring about a new order in which the gendered division of labour will no longer position men over women. He represents a future of equality they have not experienced within the patriarchal framework of the masculine Doniphon/Valance oligarchy.
This suggestion is further reinforced when Stoddard discovers that Hallie cannot read and offers to help her learn. She responds: “What for? What good has reading and writing done you? Look at you. In an apron.” Hallie sees that despite his formal education, in the context of Shinbone, Stoddard is no better off than she is; indeed, it seems his choice of books over guns has left him vulnerable. For Hallie, living in a traditionally masculine world dominated by Doniphon and Valance, “language is false or at best ineffectual; only actions are real.” (Tompkins 1992, p.51)

When Hallie leaves the room, Nora tries to reason with Stoddard: “What is reading and writing for a girl? She’ll make a wonderful wife, Hallie, for the man she marries.”

However, Hallie and Nora ultimately embrace the opportunity to acquire literacy and thereby challenge their marginalisation in the masculine frontier. When Hallie shares the news with Nora that Stoddard will teach her to read and write, Nora shares her excitement: “I cannot say my ABC in Swedish. Maybe you can teach me in English.” Stoddard’s narcissistic masculinity, however, does not bring about the opportunity they believe he represents; rather he uses their hope for leverage to improve his own position. Hallie ironically does become only the “wonderful wife” that Nora initially forecast.

Stoddard’s failure as man is repeatedly emphasized in the film. When Stoddard, in the words of Valance, begins work as “the new waitress,” Valance trips him as he is walking past. Because Stoddard was carrying Doniphon’s food, Doniphon stands to confront Valance. Valance also stands, ready for confrontation. By contrast, Stoddard remains on the floor, looking up at them. This scene positions Stoddard as physically weak compared to Doniphon and Valance for the second time, unable or unwilling to stand as they do. As Place argues, “throughout the film, Ranse
seems to possess a collapsible body without real strength comparable to that of Liberty or Tom.” (1974, p.218) He has no backbone, so to speak.

Stoddard’s masculinity is further undermined in the scene that ensues. Valance backs down from the confrontation with Doniphon, and Tom asks jokingly, “Now I wonder what scared him off?” Dutton Peabody, founder of the Shinbone Star, sarcastically responds, “You know what scared him? The spectacle of law and order here (gesturing to Stoddard) rising up outta the gravy and potatoes.” Doniphon and Peabody laugh, and Stoddard concedes, that it was Doniphon, with the help of Pompey’s gun, which made Valance flee. Here he is forced to acknowledge his inferior masculinity.

As Pumphrey argues, “incompetent men are marked as too closely linked to the feminine sphere. They are incapable of forceful action and lack combat skills; they are willing to express emotion, are idealistic or committed to Romance; they are domesticated and too willing to serve.” (1995, p.53) Of course, Stoddard eventually decides to meet Valance in a showdown, and in doing so demonstrates a desire to be the type of masochistic and physically dominant man that Doniphon represents. This moment, notably, comes after Stoddard finds the office of the Shinbone Star vandalised, its editor Dutton Peabody badly beaten, and his sign, “Attorney at Law” riddled with bullet holes. Only at this point does Stoddard agree to face Valance, but before he does so he casts aside the remaining pieces of his sign, metaphorically casting aside his narcissistic model of masculinity. Stoddard also comes to recognise that his supposed killing of Valance was crucial to establishing the system he desired.

For Pippin:

Valance must be killed by a representative of a new order; his death must *mean* that. So since
Tom is unseen and quickly vanishes, everybody can think that Ransom Stoddard killed Valance and so can distinguish this act of violence from a personal by associating it with Ranse’s ideals, can believe the rule of law and democracy triumphed. (2010, p.81)

The setting for the clash between Stoddard and Valance is crucial. In The Material Ghost: Films and Their Medium, Gilberto Perez argues: “the reason the Western has the classic showdown between the hero and villain take place on the main street of town is that the matter at stake is not merely personal but a public, a social matter.” (1998, p.237) Stoddard needs to align himself with the prevailing paradigm of the masculine hero, whose frontier actions upheld the values and beliefs of the community. However, the film makes clear that he is a false hero.

Stoddard only reveals the truth of Valance’s killing after Doniphon’s death. However, Scott rejects the story, which is more a confession, for violating the myth of the West: “This is the west, Sir. When legend becomes fact print the legend.” This is an epiphanic moment for Stoddard and it denies him the cathartic relief of an absolution. It also upholds the former model of masculine supremacy. As Roche and Hosle suggest, “Ranse has been successful in his overarching goal of bringing democracy and good government to his people, but he is recognized not for his democratic service but for the old morality to which he owes his success and which he has knowingly worked to replace.” (1994, p. 140)

In the concluding scenes the distinguished Senator Stoddard stands with Pompey next to Doniphon’s coffin. Pompey does not seem to have benefited from the social changes initially wrought by Stoddard. His clothes are shabby and worn; he still
waits on Doniphon. Stoddard does not seek to explain any of this but rather hands Pompey a sum of money, as if he were a beggar. “But Mr. Ranse,” Pompey says with surprise. Stoddard shakes his hand and reassures him, “Pork chop money.”

The film closes with Stoddard and Hallie on board a train after leaving Shinbone. After Stoddard commends the train conductor, the conductor responds, “Nothing’s too good for the man who shot Liberty Valance.” The despondent look on Stoddard’s face conveys the realisation that he is, as a man, a fraud.

Conclusion

*The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* seeks to preserve patriarchal frameworks that promote a masochistic mode of masculinity. It does this by presenting the loss of masochistic masculinity as a sad and calamitous event. It also shows the narcissistic mode of masculinity as lacking the qualities of the masochistic mode, and as being premised on falsehoods.

This is symbolically played out through the motif of the cactus rose. In the flashback sequence that comprises the majority of the film, we see Doniphon brings Hallie a cactus rose. She gushes over it, but Stoddard frowns at it. Pompey plants it in her garden and later, when she shows it to Stoddard again, she says: “Look at that. Isn’t that the prettiest thing you ever did see?” Stoddard responds: “Yeah, it’s very pretty. Hallie, did you ever see a real rose?” The film thus establishes two forms of masculinity—one natural and wild; one cultivated and feminine—represented by the rose.

When Hallie first arrives back in Shinbone for Doniphon’s funeral, she comments to Appleyard: “Place has sure changed. Churches, high school, shops.” She
does not seem to endorse the change, but rather to despair at the loss of something. Appleyard responds, “Well, the railroad done that. Deserts’ still the same.” There is a silence but Hallie understands the cue and replies: “The cactus rose is in blossom.” Hallie does not explicitly ask to see Doniphon’s house, but Appleyard guides the wagon to Doniphon’s old farmhouse, burnt and abandoned, its garden overgrown with cactus roses. The flowering of the cactus roses here represents the abiding grandeur represented by Doniphon’s traditional masculinity. It is a connection emphasised when Hallie places a cactus rose on his coffin at the end of the film, representing her rejection of the narcissistic masculinity represented by Stoddard and confirming her allegiance to Doniphon’s masochistic mode of masculinity.
Field of Dreams is a 1989 film written and directed by Phil Alden Robinson. It is based on the 1982 W.P. Kinsella novel Shoeless Joe. Field of Dreams is set in Iowa, USA, in the late 1980s. The film follows the story of Ray Kinsella, a thirty-six-year-old Iowa corn farmer who hears an ethereal voice while tending his corn. Soon after he ploughs under some of his crop and builds a baseball field that becomes host to an array of long dead baseball players, led by Shoeless Joe Jackson. Ray and his family—his wife Annie and daughter Karin—suffer significant financial hardship throughout the film with the increasing likelihood they will lose their farm to the bank. However, with the help of a reclusive former civil rights activist, Terence Mann, they are able to make sense of the appearance of the ghostly players and avert foreclosure. The culmination of the film is the arrival of Ray’s father to the field. He is a baseball lover, who has been dead for some fifteen years. Ray had not spoken to his father for many years before his death and they reconcile over a game of catch.

The contention of this chapter is that Field of Dreams is a sentimental and nostalgic attempt to articulate the value and necessity of patriarchal hierarchies and social practices. It differs from The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance in that it is not a lament to the loss of a masochistic mode of masculinity and the Fordian hero, but a resurrection of them. The film reimagines early twentieth-century America as a gilded age, set against a present and future where traditional patriarchal practices have been corrupted by a fixation on financial gain and a lack of spiritual faith. It is the contention of this chapter that Field of Dreams achieves its glorification of a traditional patriarchy by merging the history and mythology of sport, specifically
baseball, with older Christian notions of redemption, focused on the importance of the father and of faith.

The first section of this chapter contends that sport as an institution and an event promotes the same version of hegemonic masculinity commonly found in Westerns and specifically in the Fordian hero. This section also identifies sport as increasingly replacing institutionalised religion in providing socially cohesive structures and myths. Further it sees sport as doing this without facing the critique and scrutiny experienced by other patriarchal institutions, such as film.

The next section sees *Field of Dreams* as belonging to the magic realist genre. While it maintains, if somewhat ironically, its links with a marginal perspective—represented here by the “victims” of masculinity’s transition in a capitalist environment—it differs from most magic realist texts in not involving a deconstructive impulse. The myths it constructs are held up not for ironic interpretation but for faithful allegiance. Specifically, *Field of Dreams* uses the magic realist genre to promote traditional Christian ideologies through sport.

The final section of the chapter examines the ways in which the text positions the father as the Christian God. The film also valorises pain and sacrifice as key characteristics of the hegemonic masculinity that sport promotes.

**A Sporting Frontier**

The Western film genre and professional sport are both premised on a hierarchical framework that is inherently patriarchal. Westerns, as we have seen, played a key role in promoting a hegemonic masculinity premised on physical dominance of the
environment, other men and women. Twentieth-century sports, especially professional sports, promote the same type of hegemonic masculinity.

The decline of the Western film genre from primetime TV and mainstream cinema during the late 1960s, and its relegation to relative obscurity throughout the 1970s and 1980s, was facilitated in part by the growing strength and influence of various social justice movements. These movements, such as civil rights and feminism, sought to end the subordination and marginalisation commonly associated with the patriarchal hierarchies Westerns endorsed.

It is the contention of this chapter that sports, and fictional texts focussed around sports fill the space previously held by the Western. Sports naturalise patriarchal hierarchies, despite the increasing scrutiny of social justice movements, in a way that is arguably more powerful and sophisticated than Westerns, because it is grounded in both a biological argument about male physiological superiority and in Christian myths around physical suffering.

Thomas DiPiero, in “Angels in the (Out) Field of Vision”, sees the relationship between the Western and sport as one in which there is a dominance of a particular space. DiPiero, in regards to Westerns, talks specifically about land, especially the frontier wilderness. He suggests that, “the sort of mastery that seemed possible in the Western had to take on a different form once it was relocated in a different genre.” (1997, p.200) Taking an example from the Western, we have seen how Tom Doniphon in The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance dominates the spaces he is in until he is replaced by Ransome Stoddard. Likewise, the athlete dominates the space of the playing field until such time he is defeated by another and replaced. Access to the playing field, like access to the frontier, is thus subject to performance. DiPiero suggests that while Westerns celebrated individualism and self-reliance, sport
has more to do with the signification of this and “the production of a hegemonic narrative of identity.” (p. 202) That narrative is one that promotes patriarchal hierarchies and gendered identities premised on biological essentialism. This narrative contends that only men are capable of the type of performance that leads to the dominance and ownership of space, be it in the frontier wilderness or on the playing field.

In *Sport, Masculinities and the Body*, Ian Wellard suggests that sport “provides not only a site for learning social codes relating to gender but can be considered a prime site where hegemonic masculinities are made and remade.” (2009, p.21) Wellard understands that very few men will achieve the hegemonic masculinity displayed by professional athletes, but participation at any level validates and endorses masculine hierarchies. Such participation and performance is conditional on adhering to what Wellard calls “social codes”, associated with heteronormative patriarchal concerns, but it is, however, not a simple matter of learning “social codes.”

The patriarchal segregation of sport is based on a biological essentialism that, put simply, states that women are not tough enough, physically, emotionally or psychologically, to play with men. Although most mainstream male-exclusive sports have leagues for women, they lack the funding, profile, and social prestige of their male counterparts. For Eric Anderson in *Inclusive Masculinity—The Changing Nature of Masculinities* the institutional privileging of male sport, based on the patriarchal idea of biological supremacy, is ultimately self-supporting. He argues:

the self and forced segregation of females from males in sport means that men and women are schooled in different institutions, and one sex is left severely lacking in valued training and social
networking. Clearly, women have a hard time competing with the type of masculine and social capital that sport yields, not because they lack male genitalia, but because they are formally segregated from boys and men in sport. (2009, p. 62)

In fact, when women do manage to replicate male performance in sport they are often derogatorily labelled as “manly” suggesting a perverse otherness.

This issue was recently highlighted in Ben Rothenberg’s “Tennis’s Top Women Balance Body Image With Ambition,” which appeared in The New York Times in 2015. Rothenberg interviewed several prominent female tennis players, including Serena Williams, about their struggle with body image and the difficulty they face in maintaining their femininity. The article, despite its intentions to highlight the difficulty some women face as professional athletes, served to remind readers that, regardless of the quality of performance female athletes produce, they are still subject to the male gaze, and femininity and sport remain difficult to reconcile. Such articles coincide with the rising international profile of the Ultimate Fighting Championship fighter Ronda Rousey, and the announcement by the Australian Football League that it hoped to have a professional women’s league in place by 2017 rather than its initial timeline of 2020. Whether these developments are the beginnings of systemic change remains to be seen. Historically, however, male and female performances are compared only to highlight male biological superiority in terms of physical prowess. Such a comparison legitimises patriarchal hierarchies in sport and outside of sport.

Sport is, as Lois Bryson contends in Challenges to Male Hegemony in Sport, “an admired social activity” and “also something to which we are exposed daily and
from a very young age.” Sport is, as Bryson states, “an immediate mass reality” (1990, p.174), which has been fortified by increasingly sophisticated telecommunications technologies and legitimised through formalised education. Sport, as John Hargreaves notes in *Sport, Power, and Culture*, is “eulogized by educators, philanthropists and social reformers, appropriated by politicians and promoted by the modern state.” (1986, p.1) Some sports are, however, more privileged than others. It is the contention here that the sports attracting the greatest admiration are those which provide a space for the performance of a hegemonic masculinity that promotes patriarchal ideas and beliefs in the manner of the Fordian hero.

Celia Brackenridge, whose work on gender inequality in sport spans twenty-five years, argues that not only is sport a “sex segregated social institution” but that “woven into these sex and gender divisions is the heterosexual imperative that privileges particular expressions of masculinity above others, and above all types of femininity” (2001, p.81). The “particular expressions of masculinity” to which Brackenridge refers are those that involve physical dominance over others, both directly and indirectly, and a willingness to endure physical pain.

Masculine displays in sporting contests thus resonate with the displays of dominance and masochism played out in the frontier spaces of the Western. Wellard similarly argues that “contemporary sporting practice produces and promotes an environment where displays of traditional masculinity, those which present competitiveness, aggressiveness and toughness, are seen as normal and necessary.” (2009, p.14) There is also the evocation of a kind of Manifest Destiny when it comes to masculine dominance in sport, played out through the suggestion of a biological destiny of supremacy.
The sporting field becomes a type of frontier wilderness that the athlete enters. It is a space where social rules and norms do not readily apply, and where violence is typically admired and celebrated. At the conclusion of the sporting contest the athlete re-enters society or returns from the frontier wilderness. In this way, such sporting contests offer a nostalgic re-enactment of the dominant masculine qualities seen as necessary to tame the frontier wilderness. Unlike the Western, however, where life or death is often at stake, the athlete suffers only a metaphoric death if vanquished. It is a metaphoric death that carries weight and is often seen as symbolic of physical, emotional and psychological weakness. Yet there is also usually the chance of redemption, the opportunity to claim or reclaim the hegemonic position through a re-contest. The suffering experienced directly and indirectly by participants and spectators through loss or failure, coupled with redeeming moments of success, forms the dominant narrative by which sport is shaped into social and pedagogical myths based around masculine identity. Using the example of baseball, which is particularly pertinent to the text for study here, Dipiero states “baseball’s mythologizing potential effectively complements the ritualistic tests of masculinity it provides its players in order to produce an idealized view of American manhood, one that emphasizes self-possession, quiet determination, strength, courage, leadership, and individualism.” (1997, p.210) These are, of course, strikingly similar to the masculine ideals and values celebrated in the frontier myths of the Western as discussed in the previous chapter.

These patriarchal mythopoeic elements of sport and the Western bring us to a brief discussion of the patriarchal mythopoeic elements of the Christian tradition. Christianity promotes patriarchal hierarchies through sacred texts that provide specific rules and guidelines for living, often based on masochistic fortitude. If followed, these
promise eternal life in heaven after death on earth. One of the main functions of religion is to provide rules for playing but also codes for living, with the offered reward of actual or vicarious success. In *God In The Stadium: Sports and Religion in America*, Robert J. Higgs argues that “wherever we look in American society we see links between sports and religion and even the confusion of one with the other.” (1995, p.1) Higgs argues that sport and religion evolved in similar ways in the United States but that, in particular, the television age has led to the “religionizing of sport.” (p. 16) For Higgins, this is related to a “muscular Christianity,” which he defines as intense and determined delivery of the gospels that position parishioners in a struggle against an enemy. Higgs sees the relationship between sport and religion as problematic because sport is at odds with the ethos of Christianity that is to trust in God. Sport, according to Higgs, is predicated on competition.

Charles S. Prebish, in his definitive work *Religion and Sport: The Meeting of the Sacred and Profane*, has a slightly different view. Prebish argues:

> it is not just a parallel that is emerging between religion and sport, but rather a *complete identity.*
>
> *Sport is religion* for growing numbers of Americans, and this is no product of simply facile reasoning or wishful thinking. Further, for many, sport religion has become a more appropriate expression of personal religiosity than Christianity, Judaism, or any of the traditional religions. (1993, p.62)

Prebish examines sport as religion, using theoretical and methodological frameworks. A core focus for Prebish is that “sport has appropriated significant religious
terminology as a means of expressing the sincerity, fervor, and seriousness of sport.”

Prebish highlights the use of words such as “sacred” and “sacrifice” and contends that “in many cases there is absolutely no difference in the meaning that each term carries for the two traditions in question.” (p.63) This is because, for the participant and spectator, sport serves the same function as religion in providing meaning, comfort and purpose in life.

This chapter agrees with Prebish but also sees that the importance of sport in maintaining patriarchal hierarchies present in Christianity is increasingly crucial given the declining influence of Christianity, especially in the United States.

Jon Meacham, writing in *Newsweek* in 2009 and citing results from the American Religions Identification Survey and a Pew Forum poll, states that “the number of Americans who claim no religious affiliation has nearly doubled since 1990, rising from 8 to 15 percent” (2009, p.34). The Pew report, *U.S. Public Becoming Less Religious*, released in 2015 by the nonpartisan Pew Research Centre, likewise found:

The share of Americans who say they are “absolutely certain” God exists has dropped more sharply, from 71% in 2007 to 63% in 2014. And the percentages who say they pray every day, attend religious services regularly and consider religion to be very important in their lives also have ticked down by small but statistically significant margins. (2015, p.3)

Prebish makes the point that “sport activity provides a continual stream of resacralization and meaning for our everyday world, just as traditional religion
offers.” (1993, p. 66) It is not unreasonable to conclude that sport has become a new site for worship, one that has increasingly taken on the role of spiritual comforter.

Sports are, like religion, imbued with myths that serve the interests of patriarchy and that bind the present to the past. In any given sport there are games, individuals and events, real, embellished and imagined, that serve as sacred texts. These are often infused with the fantastic or the magical in ways that allow the narrative to transcend its context and have application outside of the playing field.

**Magic Realism and Mythopoeia in *Field of Dreams***

*Field of Dreams* is a magic realist text that inverts much of what the genre more typically seeks to achieve. Magic realism is a genre that emerged in response to the impact of European colonisation and the process of cultural homogenisation that colonisation often demanded.

Colonialism is overtly hierarchical and at its core involves one group identifying another as fundamentally misguided or inferior or vulnerable. More importantly, it requires the specific action of colonisation, the motivation of which is usually self-serving but often disguised as the bringing of loosely defined ideologies and agendas, such as freedom or spiritual enlightenment or economic development.

What it brings to the coloniser is a source of wealth through exploitation and a foreign space that in time should reflect its own image, validating its sense of superiority.

As various critics have documented, magic realism emerged in Latin America as a reaction to and critique of the marginalisation and subordination that occurred as a consequence of European colonisation there. The Cuban writer Alejo Carpentier, author of the 1949 novel *The Kingdom of this World*, is regarded as one of the earliest
proponents of Latin American magic realism. In the same year the Guatemalan writer Miguel Angel Asturias’s *Men of Maize* examined the destruction of Mayan culture by European colonisers who commodified agricultural practices. Asturias presents agricultural practices as complex and rich in mythology and meaning. However, it was the worldwide success of the Columbian writer Gabriel Garcia Marquez’s 1967 novel *One Hundred Years of Solitude* that popularised the genre internationally.

The purpose of the magic realist genre, as Maria Takolander argues in *Catching Butterflies: Bringing Magic Realism to Ground*, is “to confuse the genres of realism and fantasy in order to suggest that the hegemonic discourse of realism is not an objective representation but a partisan fabrication and that the hegemonic reality it defends, likewise, is not a self-evident entity but an ideological construct.” (2007, p.14) Thus, magic realism engages in a process of deconstruction that illuminates the fragility and temporality of meaning. This provides a framework through which dominant social systems and their institutions can be critiqued and deconstructed.

Indeed, magical realism has been widely used in colonial and postcolonial contexts around the world, and it has also been used by feminist writers, such as Angela Carter and Jeanette Winterson, who have challenged the ‘natural’ laws of patriarchal society.

Some critics see magic realism in less subversive terms. Michael Valdez Moses, in “Magic Realism at World’s End”, argues that while “premodern, presecular, prerational, and occasionally even preliterate narrative cultures and traditions have been in some sense preserved and represented within magical realist texts,” (2001, p.115) these texts do not constitute a legitimate challenge to global modernity. Valdez Moses sees magic realist novels, instead, as being akin to historical romance texts that celebrate a golden past. He contends that “the historical romance and the magical realist novel are compensatory sentimental fictions that allow, indeed
encourage, their readers to indulge in a nostalgic longing for an imaginary return to a world that is past, or passing away.” (p.118) This is certainly true of *Field of Dreams*.

*Field of Dreams* shows us that magic realism is a transideological genre in which the category of the “marginalised” can be reappropriated to deeply conservative effect. It can thus function in support of the status quo, engaging in mythopoeic retrieval which reinvigorates traditional patriarchal myths and assumptions. Indeed, *Field of Dreams* mythologises the father/son relationship as a pathway to economic and spiritual fulfilment, and conflates Christian mythology with the patriarchal sport of baseball. *Field of Dreams* also uses magic realism to highlight the folly of the social justice movements of the 1960s that challenged established patriarchal institutions.

It is not the only magic realist text of its kind. The use of magic realism to promote patriarchal mythology and hierarchies can also be seen in the 1984 film *The Natural*, directed by Barry Levinson and loosely based on the 1952 novel of the same name by Bernard Malamud. This film, also set in the world of baseball, follows the career of Roy Hobbs who as a young man is shot with silver bullet by a woman who is travelling the country killing the best male athletes. The wound limits Hobbs ability to play baseball, but he remerges mysteriously as a middle-aged player striving for a spot in the major leagues. Hobbs uses a bat called Wonderboy that he made from a tree that was struck by lightning; the same tree his father was standing under when he suffered a fatal heart attack. The film closely resembles the narrative of the Fisher King that is present in Celtic and Arthurian myths. In the same manner as in *Field of Dreams*, to which I will now turn my attention, *The Natural* promotes the importance of the father/son relationship and the space that sport has in promoting and maintaining redemption and spiritual fulfilment.
Field of Dreams presents crisis after crisis to position Ray Kinsella, the white heterosexual pastoralist, as increasingly victimised and marginalised. Ray finds himself in a similar position to Tom Doniphon, after Ransome Stoddard brings statehood to Shinbone, in that he is increasingly threatened by the prospect of unwanted change. In Field of Dreams: A Favorite of President Clinton- But a Typical Reaganite Film?, Caroline Cooper also notes the similarity between Ray’s position and that of the protagonist often seen in Westerns. She states that the canonical 1952 Western “High Noon and Field of Dreams have much in common, most obviously Hollywood’s frequent figure of a white male loner protagonist in conflict with his community.” (1995, p.163) Ray’s sacred ground, the baseball field, and the traditional patriarchal values it promotes are threatened by economic demands that have no concern for such values. This highlights, as in The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance, the friction between patriarchy and capitalism. Throughout the film Ray and Annie struggle financially so that, near the film’s conclusion, they are facing foreclosure and perhaps bankruptcy. Despite the magical happenings in his baseball field the bank sees Ray’s farm as only having monetary value. Ray’s refusal to sell, his willingness to sacrifice his home and his family’s financial security for his belief in baseball, is affirmed as first Karin, then the character of Terrence Mann, tell Ray that “people will come.” The film thus suggests that faith in traditional ways of being will overcome modern economic imperatives. Such faith will reverse Doniphon’s fate in The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance.

The voice that first whispers to Ray as he wanders through his vast cornfields in the fading light of a rural Iowa day, instructs him: “if you build it he will come.” The voice, heard only by Ray, presents an opportunity, but a conditional opportunity. It asks Ray to undertake action, to take a leap of faith and to set aside reason, trusting
in a higher power. Yet the voice also anoints Ray as chosen, as special. Ray becomes a type of primitive Western hero upholding a social good. Annie does not hear the voice and neither does Karin. The “he” the voice refers to is not initially specified. At the film’s conclusion the “he” for Ray is his father, John. However, if the pronoun is read as capitalised, the “He” refers to the Christian God, also the father. The contention here is that they are one and the same. It is a father that Ray yearns for. It is the father that becomes Ray’s saviour and in turn provides opportunity for Ray to be the saviour for his family.

Early in the film Ray confesses to Annie: “I’m thirty-six years old. I have a wife, a child and a mortgage and I’m scared to death I’m turning into my father.” Ray, at this point, sees his father as a failure. What Ray does not yet understand is that this view of his father has come from ideologies that questioned patriarchal assumptions and it is these ideologies that have led him astray, causing a rupture between father and son. *Field of Dreams* released at the end of the Reagan administration (1981-1989), seeks to challenge liberal gains made in the 1960s and 1970s. Andrew Britton argues that “patriarchy is very much the term to describe what gets reaffirmed in Reaganite entertainment: with unremitting insistence and stridency, it is the status and function of the father and their inheritance by the son that are at stake.” (2008, p. 129). The Reagan era, Britton states, is populated by antifeminist films that seek to highlight the essential nature of the father or the experience of sons who struggle to redeem their fathers. The Star Wars trilogy, in particular *Return of the Jedi*, is another example of this. The function of such films and the “essential project of the Reagan administration,” Britton believes, “is to recoup the recent losses of imperialism as rapidly as possible and to inhibit the further spread of world revolution.” (p.118) This
is something *Field of Dreams* strives to achieve, asking its audience to return to the past to protect the future.

What is notable about the film is the ways in which it introduces historical and mythical layers to the motif of the return of the father. After hearing the instruction “if you build it he will come” for a third time, and seeing a baseball field materialise momentarily in a cornfield near his home, Ray believes that the commandment, “means that if I build a baseball field out there that Shoeless Joe Jackson will get to come back and play ball again.” He thinks this appropriate and that he will be able to “right an old wrong” for Joe, who received a lifetime ban after being convicted of taking a bribe to deliberately lose the 1919 World Series.

Joe, however, ends up being more of a prophet, an intermediary who helps Ray find his way back to his father. The “old wrong” that Ray will right is the transgression he committed against his father by rejecting baseball.

Ray mentions at the beginning of the film that his mother died when he was three and that he was raised by his father. He also says that he and his father argued but that “Dad did the best he could.” Later in the film, when Ray is talking with the character Terence Mann, he reveals that his father “never made it as a ball player so he wanted his son to make it for him.” This led to Ray disliking baseball, and at the age of seventeen he “said something awful and left.” His father’s hero was Shoeless Joe, the awful thing that Ray had said was that he “could never respect a man whose hero was a criminal.” Ray’s characterisation of Joe as a criminal is not only a rejection and violation of his father and of baseball, it also challenges the validity of the traditional patriarchal values for which they stand.

Ray expresses regret that he never had the courage to apologise to his father and reconcile with him before his death. Mann describes the building of the field as
Ray’s “penance.” This act of remorse, according to the Catholic tradition, is required to re-establish a bond with God, the father, after one acknowledges sin. It is also an example of how easily religious discourse and sport interact, particularly in this film. Ray, in his confession to Mann, acknowledges he has sinned against his father by turning away from him and rejecting his teachings, which came in the form of baseball.

When Ray builds the field and Joe, dead for more than thirty years, wanders out of the corn looking as he did in 1919 he asks Ray, “is this Heaven?” Ray responds, “No. It’s Iowa.” Later in the film when Ray’s father, John, comes to play on the field he asks Ray the same question and Ray gives him the same answer. Then, hesitantly, Ray asks, “Is- is there a heaven?” John responds, “Oh yeah. It is the place dreams come true.” Ray reconsiders, “Maybe this is heaven.” This again emphasises the connection between sport and religion, and the ways in which faith in patriarchy is central to both. In Christianity one enters heaven through belief in the father. Likewise, in sport, man can become one with God, but only if he maintains faith in the patriarchal structures that exclusively celebrate men and their sporting achievements. All that is required is investment in the myths of great men. The film also makes clear that pain, as well as faith, is part of the masochistic code of masculine heroism.

The ability and willingness to endure pain as a form of sacrifice, regardless of the personal cost, is an intrinsic part of sport and the Christian tradition. Pain, physical and emotional, is “common in male-defined sport,” as Kevin Young, Philip White, and William McTeer argue in *Body Talk: Male Athletes Reflect on Sport, Injury, and Pain*, because a “willingness to risk injury is at least as highly valued as the demonstration of pure skill.” (1994, p.177) Young, White and McTeer also contend
that athletes “who demonstrate pain or remove themselves from the competition because of injury run the risk of being stigmatized by peers as less than fully masculine, particularly if the injury is not perceived as serious.” (p.190) Expression of pain is also closely linked to physical weakness which, in comparison to masculinity, is seen as characteristic of femininity and this undermines patriarchal hierarchies.

Masochism is also arguably central to Christian mythology, according to which Christ surrenders himself to the Romans who brutalise and then crucify him. His suffering is a sacrifice for his believers. Sporting contests that inflict pain allow the participant to be Christ-like and sacrifice their own physical or emotional well-being for a perceived greater good. This is what Tom Doniphon does for Hallie in The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance. This is what Ray is willing to do when the bank demands he sell or face ruin.

At one point Ray hears the mystical voice of the cornfields whisper: “ease his pain.” In response he seeks out specific individuals, one of them being Terence Mann, the only black character in the film, played by James Earl Jones. Mann is characterised as one of America’s greatest writers and advocates for social justice and change. His is a former but famed civil rights activist who has become a disillusioned recluse. He explains his own transformation in regards to activism thus: “I ate it, drank it, breathed it. Then they killed Martin. They killed Bobby. They elected tricky Dicky twice.” Mann references a tumultuous time in American history: the 1968 assassinations of Martin Luther King Junior and Robert Kennedy, both prominent social reformers, and the scandal-riddled presidency of Richard Nixon. The “they” Mann refers to are those groups threatened by the civil and social programs King and Kennedy promoted, and those who wanted to maintain the status quo. This is the group Mann had rallied against. When Ray asks him why he became a recluse and
stopped his activism he responds, “I got no more pain left for any of you. I gave at the office.” However, Mann is “saved” from his suffering through renewed faith in baseball that Ray encourages.

Earlier in the film Ray reminds Mann of an article he had written in which he expressed a desire to play baseball with Jackie Robinson, the first black player to play major league baseball in 1947, back when black and white players played in separate leagues. Promoting baseball as emblematic of what was once “good,” Mann is offered baseball as an answer to a host of unresolved historical and present problems to do with race and opportunity. Nevertheless, as Pellom McDaniels, argues in *As American As… Filling in the Gaps and Recovering the Narratives of America’s Forgotten Heroes*, the “substantial absence of these African American men from the field of dreams suggests an anxiety in juxtaposing their abilities against the men who were allowed to partake freely and without bias in the national pastime.” (2008, p.143)

As a young man, Mann had written an influential book titled *The Boat Rocker* about the need for systemic change in his society. Now, apparently made wise by the mystical and patriarchal vision of a baseball field, he comes to advocate exactly the opposite. Patriarchy, even if it is controlled by white men, must be protected. In fact, Mann once again becomes a “man,” as his name promises, but only by symbolically conceding that his previous divisive ways of thinking about men were misguided. Ray, who as a teen trusted in Mann’s words, also learns this lesson.

Mann’s cynicism and despair are replaced with a sentimental yearning for a past—one that did not historically exist. As Joakim Nilsson argues in *Take Me Back to the Ball Game: Nostalgia and Hegemonic Masculinity in Field of Dreams*, “the film’s dependence on nostalgia and myth precludes its ability to address real social
and ideological contradictions in the present or to recognise these contradictions in the past.” (2000, pp. 69-70).

Frank Ardolino similarly states, in Ceremonies of Innocence and Experience in Bull Durham, Field of Dreams and Eight Men Out, that Ray creates “a sacred place, a crossroads between the past and the present where time travel takes place and miracles occur one after another.” (1990, p. 50) This sacred place, a heaven on earth, is a baseball field that has, as Mann poetically articulates near the film’s conclusion, been the “one constant” as America “has been erased like a blackboard, rebuilt and erased again.” Baseball and the baseball field function as reminders “of all that once was good, and it could be again.” In characterising baseball thus, Mann not only rewrites history but also promotes the reinstatement of an era that subjugated him. The journey of Mannis to reject his past and atone for his own sins in causing disruption to the patriarchal order of old; he must “right an old wrong.” He thus mirrors the aged Senator Ransome Stoddard in The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance, who regrets that he displaced a traditional patriarchal model. Stoddard tries to re-establish Tom Doniphon, and the patriarchal ideologies he embodied, as the hero of the story. Mann’s role also becomes to re-establish the same patriarchal ideologies. It is after Mann praises baseball that Shoeless Joe invites him to go beyond the edges of the field where the long dead players disappear into the cornfields at the end of each day. This is Mann’s reward for letting go of his struggle to change the world and embracing the idea that the past can be reformed by the present. When Mann acknowledges the father, baseball, the white version of it, he finds his way into paradise.

In this sense the baseball field becomes a place for performance, not of the physical prowess of the players, but of rituals and ceremonies that reaffirm the stable
The film is not the only text to engage in such mythopoeia in regards to baseball. Carl Schinasi, in *What Baseball Makes*, argues that baseball “has accrued a storehouse of ... psychic artifacts and phenomena, religious, spiritual and mythological symbols and experiences.” (2010, p.220) Schinasi’s study is a tribute that elevates baseball beyond political and social criticism. Schinasi, echoing the logic of *Field of Dreams*, presents baseball as timeless, existing in the past, present and future. He further suggests that “baseball propagates a Jungian−like collective unconscious, a historical memory that threads together people and history.” (p.220) He thus elevates sport into an untouchable place, a heaven or paradise, which endures and perpetuates a narrative of social harmony that cannot be erased or reshaped by social forces.

Self-sacrifice is figured strongly as a part of this space, as evident in the subplot involving the old man Archibald ‘Moonlight’ Graham, who has never fully recovered from not being able to bat in a Major League game. He describes the experience thus: “It was like coming this close to your dreams and then watch them brush past you like a stranger in a crowd. We just don’t recognise the most significant moments of our lives while they are happening.” Yet after baseball Graham becomes a doctor and a revered member of his community. The film thus positions him as a Fordian hero, willing to give up his own needs for others. Nevertheless, when Ray asks Graham if he could have one wish, Graham wishes he could have batted in a Major League game just once.

The following day, as Ray and Terence drive to Ray’s farm they pick up a young hitchhiker, the now youthful and resurrected Archibald Graham. They deliver him to Ray’s field where he joins the baseball game. Thus Graham is rewarded for his sacrifice and his wish granted. Here the film suggests that a life of service and
sacrifice, as per the Christian narrative, is rewarded in the hereafter. However, Graham’s masochism remains an integral part of his heroism.

Later in the film, the young Graham steps off Ray’s field, transforming himself back into an elderly doctor, to rescue Karin as she chokes on a hotdog. For some unexplained reason Graham is then unable to return to the game. His heroic sacrifice for another—notably, for a female, as in *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*—comes at the expense of his own desires and happiness yet again. His sacrifice, like that of Tom Doniphon makes him a hero but it also condemns him.

Ray eases the pain of these men, Mann and Graham, as instructed by the voice coming from the cornfield, by reconnecting them with traditional patriarchal power. These men also function as aspects or versions of his father. Indeed, by easing the pain of these men, by restoring their masculinity, he also resurrests his father and comes to understand, as Deanne Westbrook argues, that to “become at one with the father is both to acknowledge the filial relationship and to take the father’s identity as father.” (1996, p.264) This is obvious when he first notices his father, John, on the baseball field and notes how young and robust he is. Ray reflects: “I only saw him years later when he was worn down by life. Look at him, he’s got his whole life in front of him.” John did, as Ray notes in the opening scene, play “in the Minors for a year or two, but nothing ever came of it.” John also idolised Shoeless Joe, a player who embodied dominant masculine performance. When Shoeless Joe was given a lifetime ban, John “died a lot.” John’s inability to succeed in baseball both personally and vicariously through Shoeless Joe is thus presented as emasculating. This is compounded by his son’s rejection of his authority. Finally, however, both John and Shoeless Joe are redeemed through the baseball field where white men engage in an endless fantasy of their central and special nature.
When Ray and John meet on Ray’s field, there is no apology from Ray, no asking for forgiveness. He tells John, restoring his authority: “You catch a good game.” When it seems John will leave, he and Ray bid each other good night and shake hands, but as John walks way Ray calls, “Hey… Dad? You wanna have a catch?” Relieved, John answers, “I’d like that.” Scott A. Winkler notes that “wrongs of the past melt away, the fissure between son and father has been healed, and the simple tossing back and forth of a baseball takes on the symbolic weight of redemption.” (p. 713) Competing forms of masculinity—those represented by Mann, Graham, Ray’s father and Ray himself—have all been reconciled to harmonious effect.

**Conclusion**

Siegfried Kracauer, in his influential work *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality*, states that because “most commercial films are produced for mass consumption, we are indeed entitled to assume that there exists a certain relationship between their intrigues and such daydreams as seem to be widespread among their patrons.” (1960, p. 163) Certainly *Field of Dreams* promotes a social dream that seems to have resonated with its audience, providing clarity in an increasingly complex world where certainties of patriarchal identity and power are under threat. The location of the film has become a significant tourist attraction and, even twenty-six years after the film’s release, remains popular as a kind of site of patriarchal pilgrimage. Visitors to the site wander in and out of the corn fields like the players in the film, or run the bases, or simply sit and watch the field. A number of articles and books have been written about the site, such as Brett H. Mandel’s *Is This Heaven?*
The Magic of The Field of Dreams. Mandel, through a series of interviews with visitors, examines the sociological and psychological function of the site and contends that visitors are those who “seek something significant in a world that often denies the spiritual, of people who seek ways to communicate powerful emotions, and of people who visit a baseball field, not for batting practice but for redemption.” (2002, p. xvii). This resonates with the argument of this chapter, aligning sport with religion, a relationship mobilised to lasting effect by Field of Dreams.
Conclusion

The issues and texts explored in this exegesis, which have focussed on the “crisis” of masculinity occasioned by social change, have functioned as the foundation for the creative artefact, which this exegesis will conclude by reflecting on.

The creative artefact, like *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* and *Field of Dreams*, is concerned with the past and how the past has shaped the present. All three texts are located in a rural setting, and they contain real or imagined frontiers, where white males, confronted with economic and social change, hope to maintain positions of authority.

In *Field of Dreams*, Ray seeks to reconnect with his father to apologise for the hurt he has caused and shows little interest in the mother he never knew, highlighting the sacredness of the father-son bond. In the creative artefact, which attempts to revise that romanticized bond, Vic yearns for his mother and the life she was denied by his violent father. However, Vic’s father remains a dominant presence in the mythology of the novel because of his heroic exploits on the sporting field and in supporting local farmers against capitalist forces. Unlike *Field of Dreams*, the creative artefact does not nurture or support the notion that sport has redemptive powers that are so strong they can alleviate physical and psychological scarring. However, it does recognise sport as a dominant social institution that mythologises its male heroes and creates sacred rituals that endorse lived views and values. Vic, for instance, often reflects on those moments in football games when something remarkable occurred and sees it as instructive in terms of how one should live.

Mobilising magical realist strategies, the novel also comments on the mythopoeic work of the Western when it comes to masculinity. The illusory
desperado is a composite Western hero derived from nearly a century of Western films. He functions, like Tom Doniphon in *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*, as the moral individualist who refuses to compromise his ideals even though it means his demise. He is opposed by the historical character of William Mulholland, the man responsible for providing the water supply to Los Angeles that allowed for its unfettered growth. In doing this Mulholland comes into conflict with farmers as he built aqueducts that took water from their farms and ruined their industry. Without Mulholland, however, there would be no Los Angeles and no Hollywood. Mulholland, like Ransome Stoddard, brings progress but in doing so he reshapes economic and social relations without regard for the sanctity with which others view the past. Vic, in the narrative, believes he must choose between them, while his wife and to some extent his mother seem to promise a different pathway into the future.

In each text there is a glorification of male performance and an absence of female performance or, indeed, of a space for female performance. In *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* Hallie spends most of the film in the kitchen or in the school, just as in *Field of Dreams*, Annie spends most of the film in the kitchen or in the role of a mother or at her daughter’s school. In the creative artefact, Jane is rarely seen outside of the home, with the exception of when she is at school with her daughters. Like Hallie, when Jane sees opportunity, she reaches for it and seeks upward mobility. However, the novel deliberately focusses on the male character of Vic and his struggle with transitioning away from hegemonic models of masculinity in response to challenges from both his wife and the marketplace.

Ultimately the creative artefact highlights the restrictive and damaging traits of patriarchal institutions and hierarchies that demand hetero-normative performance in a way that resonates with the findings of my scholarly research. In the narrative, for
instance, Vic’s father, John, has abused his wife and child, but his position is not questioned because of his masculine dominance on the football field and the belief that he brings a social good to all men through the victories of the football team. Vic’s efforts to find acceptance within a masculine paradigm, which he cannot perform, also mean that he is emotionally distanced from his wife and his children. Hegemonic masculinity is, indeed the root cause of his emotional trauma. Ultimately, Vic’s decision at the conclusion of the narrative to leave Henrithvale and its traditions signals a move towards a different paradigm.

The creative artefact here rejects the elegiac and nostalgic notions of *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* and *Field of Dreams*, nudging its anti-hero towards a different, but potentially more fulfilling, future.
References


Ardolino, Frank 1990, “Ceremonies of Innocence and Experience in *Bull Durham, Field of Dreams* and *Eight Men Out*” in *Journal of Popular Film & Television*, Vol. 18 Issue 2, pp.43-51


Brauer, Ralph 1977, “The Fractured Eye: Myth and History in the Westerns of John Ford and Sam Peckinpah,” in *Film & History: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Film and Television Studies*, Vol. 7, No.4, pp.73-84


de Beauvoir, Simone 1983 (1949), *The Second Sex*, H.M. Parshley (trans), Penguin Modern Classics: Hamondsworth


Howie, Gillian 2010, *Between Feminism and Materialism: A Question of Method*, Palgrave Macmillan: USA


Mandel, Brett 2002, *Is This Heaven? The Magic of the Field of Dreams*, Diamond Communications: Lanham


Raphael, Ray 1988, *The Men from the Boys: Rites of Passage in Male America*, University of Nebraska Press: Lincoln


Simmon, Scott 2003, The Invention of the Western Film: A Cultural History of the Genre’s First Half- Century, University of Cambridge: Cambridge


Spurgeon, Sara L. 2005 *Exploding the Western: Myths of Empire on the Postmodern Frontier*, Texas A & M University Press: College Station

Stam, Robert 2005 *Literature through Film: Realism, Magic, and the Art of Adaptation*, Blackwell Publishing: Malden

Takolander, Maria 2007 *Catching Butterflies: Bringing Magic Realism to Ground*, Peter Lang: Bern


Young, Kevin, White, Philip and McTeer, William, 1994, "Body Talk: Male Athletes Reflect on Sport, Injury, and Pain" in *Kinesiology and Physical Education Faculty Publications*, Paper 6, pp. 175-194