The Ocean Last Night - an Exegesis & Creative Artefact

by

Gregory Day

Submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Deakin University

December 2017
I am the author of the thesis entitled

THE OCEAN LAST NIGHT - AN EXEGESIS AND CREATIVE ARTEFACT

submitted for the degree of DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

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The Ocean Last Night - an exegesis
Introduction

I

Running through the body of this exegetic augmentation of my published novels is the narrative of how my family came to dwell in the specific southwest Victorian coastal landscape of Australia which serves as the geographical setting of those novels. The family story forms the spine of a layered rendition of how I as a writer came to experience this littoral landscape as emotional geography requiring a creative response.

As Bondi, Davidson and Smith make clear, ‘the difficulties in communicating the affective elements at play beneath the topographies of everyday life’ [2005, p. 1] has historically resulted in a view of geography which denied or did not even consider the powerful lens which our emotions provide us when considering place, nature and cultural landscape. Intrinsic to this in my case is the convergence of inherited memory and mythological elements implied by the initiatory seeding components of the family story which I re-enact in Chapter 1. These components have, I believed, served in some respects to counter a possible lack of any foundational creative myth in European Australian culture due to the expropriative nature of the colonial invasion and the relatively short duration time for subsequent European cultural incubation here.

As Edmund O. Wilson tells us, ‘For more than ninety-nine percent of human history people have lived in hunter-gatherer bands, totally and intimately involved with other organisms’ [1993, p. 32]. This form of cultural continuity, or withness, is a crucial factor in what Wilson has postulated in his biophilia theory as the co-evolution of human genetic and cultural structures [p. 33]. My novels imply that without consciousness of the unique and varied attenuations of this long co-evolution within what Michael Farrell, in his detailed alternative history of poetic invention in the Australian colonial period, terms the ‘unsettlement’ mode [2016, p. 2] of European Australia, we risk becoming trapped in a shrillness caused by continuing ultra-materialist tropes of viewing the land as a finite item and
commodity rather than as an inspirted, sociobiotic, and teeming entity. Similarly we risk misunderstanding some profound and fundamental requirements of human cultural activity through our preference for looking at landscape through a lens of profit-privileging capitalism. The practical consequences and interior tensions of this situation are looked at by my novels from various angles, and in a deliberated range of stylistic tones. I would hope this exegesis can act as a useful augmentation of that body of work.

In the case of my three Mangowak novels, *The Patron Saint of Eels* [2005], *Ron McCoy’s Sea of Diamonds* [2007] and *The Grand Hotel* [2010], all of which are set in a small coastal town undergoing demographic and environmental change, the stresses of the social microcosm, or small regional community, are viewed using three different literary methods. Firstly, *The Patron Saint of Eels* attempts, through the mode of a magic realist fable, to speculate upon the possibilities for a metaphysical relationship with a cultural landscape largely misread or even unread by first European settlers whose ignorance almost entirely stripped it of its aboriginal cosmologies [Pascoe 2007, p. 63]. In doing this the novel combines specifically Mediterranean and Franciscan ideas and voices, imported to Australia in the post-World War II migrations. It creates a ‘mirror-earth’, through which the combination of the picaresque and fable-like qualities of the novel seeks to dramatise possible consolations to the layerings of pain the characters are experiencing as a result of the threats to their way of life from tourism and the anthropocenic damage to the environment around them. The novel attempts to ignite compassion and wonder for the local natural world, specifically in regards to the life cycle of the local eels (*anguilla australis*), through combining the cultural tropes of a migrant culture which forms part of my own bloodline and the 21st century rural coastal Australian setting of Mangowak.

Although it is peopled by some of the same characters, *Ron McCoy’s Sea of Diamonds* shifts the fabulist and speculative tone of *The Patron Saint of Eels*, eschewing magic realism in favour of the social realist novel to express the tragic aspect of community change on the southwest Victorian coast. This novel is written within the regional realist tradition of novelists such as Thomas Hardy, Sarah Orne Jewett and John McGahern. In keeping with George Steiner’s ideas
about the primacy of an implied conversation between works of fiction themselves rather than the commentaries upon them [Steiner, 1989], the novel implies a response to those authors and others. It narrates a generational tale of gentrification and ecological change within a demotic, local setting. It does not set out to console but is built to convey the tangible intimate reality of traumas caused by materialist perceptions of the landscape as economic currency or commodity. The main character of the novel finds both solace and husbandry in the landscape and also in the nightly playing of a harmonium, whose reedy notes mingle with the sound of the ocean in his clifftop star-canopied home. Grief sings at the forefront here in a work of fiction attempting to embody Diane O’Donoghue’s notion that art ‘is both the still life as memento mori and reminder of what is alive, what still remains’ [2016, p. 189]. I agree with O’Donoghue when she writes in ‘Image, Loss, Delay’, her study of the ways in which art’s delaying power assists in our transcendence of grief, that ‘losses and deaths can often open as well as close one’s life story, along with threading through it’ [p. 190]. As such the explications of emotional geography which form the throughline of this essay go some part of the way to detailing the sources of art’s reconstituted trauma as experienced by the characters of this novel.

*The Grand Hotel* completes the three-faceted approach of the Mangowak novels through approaching the turbulence of cultural change and weak attachments to place by re-employing techniques of magic realism. In this instance, however, the magic realism plays out in the mode of farce. Its deliberately idiosyncratic yet logical convergence of dry bush humour and Antipodean neo-Dadaism is a dramatisation of cultural forms of collective irony and social protest. The ignition of this novel owes a considerable degree to the perennially subversive ideas of Hugo Ball and the Dadaists of the early twentieth century who foresaw how, through the capitalist appropriations of cultural tourism, art could come to be used against artists [Ball 1996, p. 98]. The novel also plays with landscape historian John R Stilgoe’s contention that ‘theoretical concepts and advertising and marketing ploys work best on people who fail to explore landscape first hand’ [Stilgoe 2015, p. 14]. The novel’s plot is triggered by the loss of the community’s hotel due to a real estate development which attempts to colonise environmentalist and Indigenous values as a sales pitch. The proposed development appropriates
one spelling of the name of the local aboriginal people – Wathaurong – in combination with the title of Emily Bronte’s romance novel, – Wuthering Heights – for a proposed block of culturally touristic eco-apartments bearing the name ‘Wathaurong Heights’. In this context the novel is composed in the spirit of Jed Rasula’s pithy contention that ‘the natty plaid of the necropolitan real estate developer constellates the modern image of eternal repose’ [2002, p. 66]. It dramatises, within the fictional lifeworld and cultural landscape of Mangowak, John Berger’s assertion that ‘words, terms, phrases can be separated from the creature of their language and used as mere labels. They then become inert and empty.’ [Berger 2016, p. 6] Berger’s ‘creature of language’ seems an appropriate term in the context of the grounded and geographical sense, or habitat, of language, explored in this exegesis.

The Grand Hotel completes the emotive spectrum the three Mangowak novels cover: eco-spiritual consolation, grief associated with gentrification, commodification and desacralising of place, the divination and resonance of memory in a contemporary regional place, and community irony and laughter as social protest. Accordingly these are all important components of the autoethnographic family narrative running through the following pages, as is the immersion in the quotidian textures of region and habitat that is such a crucial aspect of the novels. With respect to this specifically bioregional aspect of my work I take my lead from the multicolored mosaic-map of the many Indigenous language and tribal countries contained within what has became known as the continent, and generically, the nation of Australia. [https://aiatsis.gov.au] Indeed, I concur with historian Mark McKenna’s contention of Australian culture that in ‘our rush to anchor the nation with a binding national history, whether that be Anzac Day, Federation, immigration or economic prosperity, we have lost sight of the “specifics of place”’ [2016 p. xvi]. I also concur with ethnographer and fictocritical pioneer Stephen Muecke’s contention that ‘one lives in a place more than a time’ [Muecke 2004, p. 8]. The synchronic nature of the plot of The Grand Hotel is an attempt to dramatise that reality.

Accordingly, the fourth book, Archipelago of Souls [2015], though not a Mangowak novel as such, nevertheless takes place within the same cultural
weather of the Bass Strait geography of south-eastern Australia. It is thus deliberately conceived as being part of the same interleaving body of place-based fiction, connected as it is to my longer cycle of novels, short stories, music, artist books and poetry germinated within and about the same landscape. I should say that this body of work is very much ongoing, with a new novel, *A Sand Archive*, dealing with further aspects of the same psychoecology, scheduled for release in May 2018.

*Archipelago of Souls* deals specifically with issues of mythological lineage, unsettledness and inheritance within Australian national identity, and contrasts the commodifiable hubris of that identity with a less abstracted, and particular, sense of place. Through the dramatic context of a battle fought in the Greek Mediterranean in the Second World War involving Australian soldiers, it contrasts the mythological continuities of the island of Crete with the unsettled mythography of southwest Victoria, King Island in Bass Strait, and Australian culture as a whole. The inheritance, disinheritance, and reconstitution of mythological and metaphysical lineage in a colonial context are a key theme of this essay and are dealt with most specifically in the third chapter, *Otway Taenarum*, which contextualises the effect of Mediterranean literature on my work along with the non-fictional backstories which helped seed the Greek-Australian context of *Archipelago of Souls*.

II

To retrospectively explain the germination, process and intention of one’s own body of fiction is only in part an exercise in speculation. Although the invention of characters, place settings and narrative action is rather different from constructing a theme or argument in an essay, nevertheless it is the case that my four published novels so far have all sprung at least in part from the motivation to animate tableaux for implied social commentary on contemporary Australian regional culture within the emotional and narrative traction of literary fiction.
This speculative dramatisation of the way competing forces interact in my own specifically coastal and regional southeastern Australian living-and-working environment is therefore a theme warranting some elucidation. Perhaps more useful as an augmentation of the works of fiction, however, is an attempt to approximate the relevant environmental conditions, within the trope of emotional geography, which have had a bearing on the germination of the books.

As the light of dawn triggers the morning songs and calls of birds, as botanical species in the landscape require very specific gradations of light and temperature for their seed to germinate, so too in my own case, as a human creature through whom creative texts emerge, ingredients such as sound, scent and memory have shaped the sociobiotic conditions in which my books have seeded and found form. Thus an auto-ethnographic rendition of the possible textures and components of these sensory and memory conditions, and the way they influence each other and have co-evolved in the history and practise of both the writer and the landscape which inspires him, are key components here.

With this in mind it seems appropriate to enact a personal family narrative as an aspect of my compositional technique. I also see this as a way of avoiding what Simon Warren has called the ‘distancing technologies of academic research’ [2015, p. 112]. Thus I choose the auto-ethnographic method in order to convey the liminal landscape of the everyday life in which the books germinated and evolved, to stay in proximity to the workings behind and underneath the writing of the novels, and also to remain within calling distance of the actual stylistic modes of the novels themselves.

This auto-ethnography – or to use a mycological idea germinated more specifically from the mushroomy Otway landscape of my work – this exegetic reflection on my creative mycelium, is inevitably situated within my own understandings as the creator of the novels but also within subjects which help me reflect on and contextualise their generation: psychoecology, localism, autochthony, psychoacoustics, Indigenous studies, bioregional writing, mythopoeisis, eco-criticism. To move towards an ‘embodied methodology’ [Warren 2015, p. 109] for this schema, I have chosen to also incorporate ficto-
critical and even verse techniques in order once again to keep connecting to the everyday *hyphae*, or threading thought processes, out of which these novels get written. Importantly I feel this enables me also to speak more honestly, and from *somewhere*, as opposed to risking an overly abstracted and hegemonic tone. Employing this ‘standpoint of the storyteller’, according to Arthur Frank, is indeed an ‘ethical stance’ [2000, p. 358] affording me ‘the opposite of speaking from nowhere’ [Warren 2015, p. 113].

As my work is intrinsically placed within my lived landscape and that of my colonial Irish and Sicilian ancestors, I would say that to write about the making of my fiction in a purely theoretical and academic voice, without recourse to auto-ethnographic narrative and to the techniques of verse and the novels themselves, would be to render this exegesis disembodied and unduly retrospective in nature, and therefore to risk inauthentic impressions and conclusions. To extend the local mycological metaphor used above, I intend for this exegesis to be not just an analysis but yet another fruiting of the generative and mysteriously expansive mycelium it reflects upon. For me the landscape of my novels is, to borrow the words historian Rebe Taylor uses to describe her scholarly activities on Cape Barren Island, ‘not a research laboratory, it is a lifeworld, a beautiful place’ [2017 p. 127]. In this sense my novels could fairly be described as bioregional texts, particularly given Ruth Blair’s definition of the term ‘bioregional’ as ‘naming a kind of attention’ to lives that are ‘stitched into the physical environment’. [2012 p. 165-166] The words ‘lifeworld’ and ‘bioregion’ are of course directly linked through the etymology of their Greek root *bios*, and the ‘attention’ which Blair writes about is very much embedded in my work into the phenomena of the local biota. Importantly this biota is a zone I dwell in permanently, in all seasons and weathers, not as an excursionist or ‘travel writer’ but with my immediate and extended family, living and dead, all around me. I hope therefore that the polytemporal and heuristic approach I adopt in this exegesis, in which passages of characterisation, narrative memoir, research, and poetry enjamb, circumvents any misleading or facile associative string of related scholarly tropes. The network of strings, the *hyphae* of the mycelium of ideas and emotions I am working with here, is empirical to a passionate degree.
In this respect *The Ocean Last Night* feels like a risk-taking exercise in which I seek to respond to the feelings of Dantinean *contrapasso* I have when analysing, disassembling or undoing my creative motivations and the conditions of germination in which my creative artefacts come to exist. This approach also quite obviously risks the excessive subjectivity peculiar to the working artist talking about his or her own work. Through research as well as auto-ethnography my intention, however, is to provide the kind of document which, by admitting the indivisibility of reality, memory and dream, offers reliable and practical working insights for other practitioners of creative fiction and those interested in literary analysis, the psychogeographic processes therein, and Australian literature in particular.

‘Let the amoeba be studied where the microscope is found, the place to watch a hunting weasel is where it hunts.’ This sentence from Ian Niall’s *New Poacher Handbook* [1960, p. 2] is pertinent to my approach. Enlisting a specific and previously unrecorded family narrative in the following pages serves the purpose of not only containing the exegesis within the executive domain of the storytelling instinct which is its subject but of also properly capturing a feeling of the emotional geography or biophilic impulse which has, at least in part, germinated them.

Thus *The Ocean Last Night* begins with a rendition of the germination of my writing in an Indigenous-Anglo-Celtic-Mediterranean cultural landscape, or what could be called the Mangowak polyscale. This in turn leads us into reflections on the status of both language and creation mythology in this polyscale, which is both a multivalent postcolonial littoral, an international tourist destination, and an Anglo-Indigenous trauma site.

In practical terms the starting point for this essay is not so much an idea but a sonic seed. In Chapter One I attempt to show how my grandfather’s feelings and expressions about a 1937 visit he made to the southwest Victorian coast of his own grandparents was not, as Paul Carter might have it, that of a ‘voice crying in the wilderness set in opposition to the Aboriginal cooee crisscrossing a space in which it felt at home’ [1992, p. 27], but that of a grieving human ear finding co-
evolutionary emotional solace in the universal acoustic texture of the ocean. From there I undertake a layered account wherein each of the chapters are in part undone by what succeeds them and are therefore interdependent. Thus the sish descriptor which seems to epiphanically solve a puzzle in Chapter One is seen to constitute barely a beginning to the questions of Chapter Two. This technique of perpetual renewal is once again used in an attempt to embody the recursive, constellatory, unpredictable, mycelium-like creative process as I have experienced it. In its openness the approach has perhaps something of Situationist theory about it, specifically Guy Debord’s notion of dérive [1958], though in its heuristic aspect I could also characterise it locally as a spinifex narrative, or a spinifexing, wherein meaning accrues and binds as the narration revolves within the external environment of its research, just as sand clings to a decumbent star of hairy spinifex (Spinifex sericeus) as it rolls along a windy southwest Victorian beach.

The essay is also constructed in this manner in order to situate my creative output within a breathing habitat rather than to package it via what Lousley might call ‘an image symbolizing disappearing life’ [2016, 713]. The mycelium metaphor and the act of spinifexing within a breathing habitat of language and memory implies the primacy of both oral as well as written voices, bringing together text and physical geography, text and inherited memory, text and family and community mythologies. Of course, the development of a colonial culture quite obviously requires an admixture of the organic and technological, the local and global. Naturally enough, within my writing life, influential voices from other countries and from other regions within Australia have been integral to the cobbling-collaging-goulashing-mashing-sampling process of assembling an artistic literary voice grounded in everyday community and place.

The three chapters of the exegesis proceed as follows:

1. My Psychologically Ultimate Seashore reenacts and analyses a family ‘creation myth’ which potentially germinated my creative engagement with place and with the emotional geography of my novels.
2. Whilst continuing the auto-ethnographic narrative *One True Note* explores the difficulties one faces with respect to the ‘tools of the trade’, or language use, once a creative engagement is triggered in a culturally unsettled landscape such as that of the Bass Strait coast of southwest Victoria. This chapter specifically deals with a list of misnomers provided in Ian D Clark’s *Aboriginal Languages and Clans: An Historical Atlas of Western and Central Victoria, 1800-1900* [1990] around the transcription of the word(s) Wadawurrung. Through this it deals with issues of using an imported language, English, in concert with the imported narrative tropes of my ancestral bloodlines, to describe or embody a cultural landscape whose own language has been violently repressed, is largely unknown, and indeed endangered.

3. The final chapter, *Otway Taenarum*, documents that aspect of my creative situation which results from the loss of an existing metaphysical culture within my region due to the dispossession of the Wadawurrung and Gadabanud people and the migration of new immigrants to my region. It shows how I have threaded the ostensibly disparate *hyphae* of my own aesthetic, narrative and family inheritance, in an attempt to ‘match’ the inherent climatic and topographic *call* of my region in a body of literary work. To a certain extent it demonstrates the living practice of how this has been attempted, using the metaphor of a multi-stopped harmonium to describe the process. It also argues that the need for metaphysics and mythology in regional psychogeography is a key ingredient in what Donna Haraway calls the ‘ongoingness’ [2016, p. 101] required of our cultures in the Anthropocene epoch. Indeed the regenerative power of storytelling is a key reality of this exegesis, in that a mixture of metaphysics from migrant communities and Indigenous creation stories and astronomy can provide important combinatory paths for the reanimation of our cultural landscape in a time of ecological crisis.
Chapter 1 - My Psychologically Ultimate Seashore

What’s water but the generated soul?’

WB Yeats (epigraph to Ron McCoy’s Sea of Diamonds)

Lorne, Victoria, 1937. Who could say the name of the pollen that was billowing through the air along the road towards the pier? Who could say how many dolphins were in the pod arcing across Loutitt Bay? Who was to say how best to catch the purple crays crawling through the pools of the shelving shore, or what the name of the lemon-browed bird was bobbing in the currents between the waves?

But look, here comes a recent thing for which we do have a name: a motor car, a dark maroon Standard Tourer, with a soft top, rumbling along through the stipple of pollen fibres and beneath the dappled light of the blue gums on the point. The driver of the car has an aquiline nose and a dark complexion under a short-brimmed Stetson hat. He is heading for the Grand Pacific Hotel.

The car slows. Approaching the impressively ornate building it veers off the road and parks out front. Out of the motor car steps the man. He is middle aged, of middle height, has a dark complexion and is wearing grey suit-pants and a casual pullover.

He looks around; stretches his back after the long journey. Leaving his car door flung open he walks slowly across the quiet road, unwinding after the excitement and ordeal of driving the long road from the city of Melbourne and out over the high sea cliffs.

On the ocean side of the road he stands and gazes down towards the long pier reaching into the vast expanse of blue water below the hotel. No ships are tied there but one fishing ketch bobs amongst the deep shadows of the pylons.
It was only an hour back along the road that through the windscreen of his Tourer he had laid eyes on the ocean for the first time in his life. The man’s eyes and ears were amazed. Yet, nearly one hundred years before this, his grandparents had issued out of that very same ocean after a long voyage across the globe, arriving on a ship just up the coast a little way at Point Henry, near the regional centre of Geelong.

How could it be then that their grandson had never before seen the ocean? Where had he been? And what, we may well ask, is one hundred years in a place like this? Is it a long time, a short time, a long enough time to lose sight of what you know?

†

There are many types of silence, as many as there are sounds. Every silence has the blood of its listener pumping through it, as does any landscape of personal significance. When Indigenous Australian Archie Roach sings, in his song ‘A Child Was Born Here’ [1997]:

*Be careful where you walk in this land*
*Because a child was born here*
*And a child was born there*

he expects to be taken literally. He is singing his people’s history. Both *in utero*, and *in extremis*.

In Rob Garbutt’s study, *The Locals: Identity, Place and Belonging in Australia and Beyond* [2011], it is implied that a proper recognition of Aboriginal primacy in the landscape does not necessarily exclude the emotional traction of the same geography for non-Indigenous inhabitants. Given the violent nature of the dispossession of Aboriginal people on this continent, this is of course a complex issue. As Garbutt reflects at length on what it means to be ‘local’ in the Australian
context, he points out that ‘twentieth and twenty-first century claims of autochthony are, and have been, a response to territorial and cultural uncertainties.’ [2011, p. 184] Through our ancestors’ investment in claiming a new demesne, the entirely unlawful nature of which is documented by James Boyce in *1835: The Founding of Melbourne and the Conquest of Australia* [2011], and in their rather dogged ignorance of the Aboriginal lifeworld, and the depredations that still ensue from that ignorance, the natural connection to place that European Australians experience must often be not only stratified but conflicted.

The sounds we make, the sounds we hear, have both a cosmological (or more-than-human) reality, as well as a human one. However, there are marks of respect as well as awe, acknowledgements of what went before and what still goes on today, that need to accompany any version we utter of the telluric mystery that draws us to the very heart of our human connection to place. For just as there is blood in our ears so too are our hearts in the land and sea.

See that memory under the tree just there? Remember that morning in the rockpool?

Landscape is by its nature both independent and intersubjective; so it is for me on my home-coast. There is no silence without a listener, no landscape without a beating heart. Nowhere in my own life so far have I been without the sound of the ocean, no matter how far I am from shore. In fact, in the physical absence of the ocean shore, the tides often seem to break louder on the psychogeographic beach. These are both moon-lured tides and tides full of narrative momentum. *In situ*, no footstep I have taken on my home-coast has laid itself down upon a blank. *Here* is a live screen.

†
All those splash marks on the surface of the bay? They look like a hundred cotton seams stitching themselves across the water into the southwest. We lunge with similes, but what is actually happening here? If a man has only recently seen the ocean for the first time how could he know what is causing this effect, whether it has anything to do with fish or tides, the seasons, the currents, the angle of the sun or the phases of the moon? How could he ever understand the language of what the ocean was writing there?

Now, in the distance, beyond the flurry of the dolphin pod, he sights the white architectural stalk of the lighthouse standing sentinel. He knows the name of that headland as Split Point. He passed through it on the Great Ocean Road only half an hour before. He could hardly miss the lighthouse of course, but he had particular cause to notice the name ‘Split Point’ on the map because a friend had mentioned it to him before he left Melbourne.

Perhaps a tear comes to his eye. Perhaps he turns away, from the lighthouse, the ocean and the pier. Perhaps he looks up at the ornate filigree of the Grand Hotel’s high verandah. Perhaps he wipes his eyes. Perhaps he walks back across the road, closes his car door, and begins to ascend the hotel steps.

†

In a slew of broken concrete we are attracted to a blade of green grass. It doesn’t even have to be green either, it can be wheaten, the colour of straw or bone. When our eye lands on high viridian cliffs with the ocean lapping and roaring at them from underneath, a corresponding space opens up inside us. Some want to sing into that space. Others want to speak. Other still, perhaps the majority of people, want at least to listen as well as look.

Biophilia is the attraction of life to life. When entomologist Edward O. Wilson first coined the term in 1984 in his book of the same name, he made the point that from an early age ‘we learn to distinguish life from the inanimate and move
towards it like moths to a porch light’ [1984, p. 2]. As such he may have had perhaps some inkling of the energy his idea itself would attract in an era of ecological crisis. A key aspect of his theory is gene/culture co-evolution, wherein ‘culture was elaborated under the influence of hereditary learning propensities while the genes prescribing the propensities were spread, by natural selection in a cultural context’ [Wilson 1993, p. 32]. Wilson’s theory implies that life longs to marry life, to acquaint itself with life, to cohabitate with life. For the speaking, singing, dancing, painting, listening human this could be described as the biosphere having a call. The heart lifts, either in fear or wonder, and wants to provide an echo to that call, or, at the very least, an interpretation. Or, as Wilson puts it, ‘our existence depends on this propensity (for life), our spirit is woven from it, hope rises on its currents’. [1984, p. 1]

Although I have questions about the tendency Wilson’s writing has to abstract the regenerative power of nature into charismatic and commodifiable material lacking the crucial ‘specificity of place, time and context’ that is a key concern of mine here [Lousley 2016, p. 711], I nevertheless believe that, as an entomologist back in the 1970s and 1980s, he foresaw what is recognised these days as a problem the scientific world has in communicating urgent key concepts to a mainstream audience. In stressing both the individual and macro-scale of the ecological crisis through a focus on concepts such as biodiversity and biophilia, Wilson’s approach successfully captures the human imagination. This is important to me as a novelist working in the landscape. Geography invested with emotion, with the clear and palpable delineations of emotional response and immersion, is by its nature an unsequestered realm, neither a clinical laboratory claiming scientific or scholarly objectivity nor a charismatic brochure intent on upsell. Both are equally anathema, in my experience, to the production of substantial works of fiction in situ.

Here then is my position on the map, here then are my coordinates of heart and mind, grief and vision, history and its impact.

Wilson suggests a force of attraction between life and life, which cannot help but remind us of the force of gravity in our atmosphere. And so, when the hills above
Bass Strait curve down from sky to shore on such a grand scale, I cup my ear for the correspondence in local human culture. Some sound or text or dance or image that those that live here have made in response. But what happens when the human voices of such a compelling landscape, or any landscape, have experienced a rupture more akin to a gravitational attraction to death rather than life? Is that necro, rather than bio, philia? Does our inheritance of that rupture leave us wanting to offer a reply to the life of the place but only capable of making a constricted or shrill one?

_Philia_ (ˈfɪliə/; Ancient Greek: φιλία), often translated ‘brotherly love’, is one of the four ancient Greek words for love: _philia_, _storge_, _agape_ and _eros_. In Aristotle's _Nicomachean Ethics_, _philia_ is usually translated as "friendship" or affection. The complete opposite is called a phobia.

†

When environmental music pioneer Ivr Teibel went out onto Coney Island in Brooklyn in 1969 to help record the sound of the ocean for a friend’s film he wasn’t expecting what he found. In his studio the next day, as he began to edit and loop his recordings of the waves, cutting out any extraneous human sounds as he went, he began to notice that, unlike all the other field recordings he’d worked with, this one didn’t start to grate on his nerves in a way that made him want to turn it down as he worked. Instead the opposite was happening. He was becoming more and more relaxed.

According to an extensive biographical piece Mike Powell wrote in _Pitchfork Magazine_ with the assistance of the Ivr Teibel Archive, it is clear that Teibel was no ‘nature boy’ [Powell 2016]; rather, he was interested in creative technologies, in photography, and in sound, and the effects of sound. Powell recounts how, after Teibel had made a few more ocean recordings - on Martha’s Vineyard, also in Virginia - he took one of his loops to a friend, Louis Gerstman, a
neuropsychologist specialising in speech synthesis. Gerstman fed Teibel’s ocean loop into a large old computer, an IBM 360, and began smoothing and modifying what he had captured, just as he would the recorded sentences of his patients. For Ivor Teibel the finished result turned the proverbial lightbulb on in his head. He promptly formed a company called Syntonic Research Inc. and released the hour length recording on a vinyl LP, complete with a Bauhaus-inflected sleeve design. He called it Environments 1: Psychologically Ultimate Seashore [1969].

Remarkably, for a record of ostensibly unadulterated ocean sounds with no artist listed as its progenitor, Environments 1 was licensed by Atlantic Records and sold numerous copies. An argument could be made that, because of such mainstream acceptance, it could potentially be placed alongside the certainly more seminal Vexations by Erik Satie [1893], John Cage’s 4.33 [1952], and Brian Eno’s Discreet Music [1975] as a pioneer album of ambient music. Less auspiciously however, it has also spawned a global industry using the sounds of the natural world as kitschy relaxation and healing aids.

Through the remainder of the sixties and through the 1970s Teibel released a further ten records in the Environments series, which included other such curated phenomena as rainforest sounds, sailing boats in the wind, and the sound of thunderstorms, among others.

†

‘Maybe the nature of a particular can be understood only in relation to sound inside the sense it quickens.’

Susan Howe – Vagrancy In The Park

Once he enters the Grand Hotel building, the man removes his hat. Immediately he sees the golden ribbed horn of a gramophone on a table near the bottom of the staircase at the far end of the foyer. But even before that he hears the sound.
Perhaps he actually heard it coming up the steps. The doleful strains of the orchestra. The crackle of the needle. The voice.

*Caro mio ben,*
*Credimi almen,*
*Senza di te languisce il cor.*

It is just before midday. He stands alone with the music.

*Il tuo fedel*
*Sospira ognor.*
*Cessa, crudel,*
*Tanto rigor!*

Eventually a member of the hotel staff appears through a side doorway. A young man, he comes initially with a bustling gait, but sensing the stillness of the visitor listening there with his hat in his hands, he slows and acknowledges the music with a smile.

It is our visitor who speaks first.

Good day to you.

And to you, sir. Can I be of assistance?

The visitor nods towards the gramophone. Can you tell me who is singing?

The concierge smiles once more, but also with the beginnings of a laugh. I can, sir, he says. Normally I am no aficionado, but Mr ---, who owns the hotel, only recently bought this record. He has made sure it is known to us all.

I see.
The singer is Beniamino Gigli, sir. An Italian. There is a second ‘g’ in the surname but you don’t pronounce it. At present we are playing the record rather a lot.

Thank you.

You like it, sir?

Well yes, I do.

Can I ask then, if you don’t mind. Do you understand what he is singing about? That’s what always stumps me.

Our visitor frowns. Perhaps a little, he says. My mother is half Italian.

The young concierge raises his eyebrows in surprise. I see, sir, he says.

There is a pause in their conversation, and briefly in the music. Sish, sish. When the arias recommence the concierge says: Now then sir, do you have a booking for a room? Or can I help you with anything else?

†

When I was a teenager, making my first acquaintance with a degree of autonomy from my parents’ authority, the accompanying olfactory ingredients in the coastal environment – moonah blossom, zinc cream, dusty leucopogon leaves, mosquito coils, sand, estuary silt, marram grass, the surf, just to name a few – became forever associated for me with feelings of freedom. An important component of this freedom, I believe, was what classical scholars might describe as *eros*. Anne Carson has written in her book *Eros The Bittersweet* of how ‘love does not happen without loss of vital self’ [2009, p. 32]. As I understand it she is referring here to *eros* as an expropriative force whereby ‘the lover is the loser’ [p. 32]. I
could transfer this notion to the *environment* in which the sexual attraction takes place, not insofar as the environment experiences a loss in itself as a result of the events taking place within it, but that the lover, through the senses, absorbs or incorporates, as opposed to stealing or expropriating, this environment into himself and his story. In this way the environment can be seen as a third category combining the qualities of both ‘lover’ and ‘beloved’. A reticulation process takes place whereby the human lover, by becoming connected to the environment through interaction with the human beloved, gives a part of himself over to that place, a process which, in turn, forever blends the environment with the beloved. Another perspective on this can be found in Roland Barthes’ *A Lover’s Discourse*, where he writes: ‘from the loved being emanates a power nothing can stop and which will impregnate everything it comes in contact with’ [2002, p. 173]. In this way I believe both the lover and the beloved are inextricably linked to the third category of the environment in the psychoecological conditions of *eros*, such as those I experienced as a teenager.

Due to the fashions of the era (the late 1970s and early 1980s), I enjoyed a cultural soundtrack to this combinatory and impregnated environment of freedom and discovery in popular songs on the radio and on cassettes and vinyl records. One artist who seemed to harmonise best with the type of psychoecological correspondence I was experiencing was the Canadian musician Neil Young. Subsequently, around the time when an interest in the polyphonic cultural lineage of the ‘unsettlement’ space [Farrell 2016, p. 2] I had inherited began to awaken in me, I discovered that many of the songs of Neil Young that I was listening to were written or recorded in his house and studio on the Pacific coast in California. I also became aware at this time that both the Great Ocean Road area (my eros-environment) and the Grand Pacific Hotel (where my grandfather stayed in 1937), are in a way scions of that Californian culture in which he lived.

According to Doug Stirling in his book *Lorne: A Living History* [2004], Henry Gwynne, who built the ‘elegant American style’ Grand Pacific Hotel in 1879, had been inspired to do so by a journey he made along the Californian coastal highway a few years before. *I know a spot*, he must have thought to himself, *where only the wind blows*. Into that assumed ‘vacancy’ he inserted his plan. It is
interesting to me how this assumed vacancy, and the hotel site’s assumed lack of obstacles for potential development, accords with Alfred Crosby’s observation that ‘the success of European ecological imperialism in the Americas was so great that Europeans began to take for granted that similar triumphs would follow wherever the climate and disease environment were not outright hostile’ [1986, p. 297].

Many years later in 1919, as civil engineer and historian Peter Alsop documented in *A History of The Great Ocean Road* [1982], when Messrs Howard Hitchcock and Co. of the philanthropic Great Ocean Road Trust were devising the idea of a road that would open up the scenery of the Otway coast, it was the Californian ocean highway that provided a template. Its very existence, along with the road through Ilfracombe in Devon, England, gave a real-life imprimatur to their vision.

Why then does the hotel, and the road running to it, inspire something more in us than might be expected of a copy or simulacra? Are we, for instance, who live in and around this coast, really here at all? For example, are we missing out on some intrinsic understandings because of our lexicon of borrowed landmarks and names?

*gannet, myrtle beech, crayfish, bullant, bluegum, wattlebird, sheoak, bandicoot, nesophila...*

If I call you Susan and your name’s actually Joy, do you feel the miss?

†

The hotel’s guest is our grandfather. By the time he went to bed that first night in the Grand Pacific Hotel it is possible that he had taken Gigli’s voice, the melodies and the sentiments of the record the publican had purchased, into the very salt of
his bloodstream. If nothing else it had put him in a listening frame of mind. When he went down for lunch after being shown his room it may have been ‘Panis Angelicus’, the bread of heaven, coming from the golden ribbed horn. Later on in the day, when he stepped out through the foyer to stroll down the slope and inspect the pier, it may have been Bassani’s ‘Posate, dormite’. The eternal sleep of heaven. Whatever the case he was caught, in his very own mappamundi, between the two poles of heaven and hell.

He died before I was born so I can only imagine him standing at the end of the pier looking back across the bay towards the lighthouse. The image makes me think of Jay Gatsby gazing across at the East Egg light in F. Scott Fitzgerald’s novel. But despite the fact that the very existence of the Grand Pacific Hotel in Lorne was inspired by Henry Gwynne’s tour along the North American coast, why in this case does the involuntary association feel like a trivial literary allusion? Is it only because our grandfather’s situation is a real life one, and therefore to be deemed more important than that of Fitzgerald’s fictional character? Or is there some other reason, something caught not between our judgements of what is real and imagined, but between our notions of this world and the next?

For our grandfather there was no eros at that point, no Daisy Buchanan to yearn for just across the bay. Quite the opposite. His young wife, Rita, our grandmother, had just died after a long, gruelling illness. William, or Bill, Day was a widow in the midst of his mourning. That’s why he had been persuaded to come on his own to Lorne.

†

‘All that is told of the sea has a fabulous sound to an inhabitant of the land, and all its products have a certain fabulous quality, as if they belonged to another planet, from seaweed to a sailor’s yarn, or a fish story.’
Between 2005 and 2010 I published three novels set in the fictional town of Mangowak on the Bass Strait coast of southwest Victoria. Each of these three novels takes a different approach to characterising the demographic and environmental pressures the coast has come under since European settlement. Taken together, they represent an attempt to build a body of fiction that provides a multivalent or prismatic view. All three novels specifically dramatise the way individuals live emotionally in their environment and how cultural change is dealt with in the private lives of the novels’ fictional characters and in their community as a whole.

In 2009, as I was composing the third of the Mangowak novels, The Grand Hotel, a consultancy company based in Melbourne called ‘Village Well’ was commissioned by the Great Ocean Road Coast Committee (GORCC) to produce a document on the future development of Point Grey, at the southern extent of the township of Lorne. By September of that year this document materialised as the 125-page ‘Point Grey & Slaughterhouse – Place Essence Report.’

Point Grey, site of the Grand Pacific Hotel and the Lorne pier, along with the nearby former slaughterhouse area of the colonial town, was considered by GORCC, the commissioners of the report, to require fresh ‘investigation and planning’ for ‘future use and management’ [Village Well 2009, p. 7]. The creators of the ‘Place Essence Report’, Village Well, described themselves in the document they produced as ‘place makers’. The document also incorporated their self-description as being specialists in ‘the 5 Ps of Place Making – People, Place, Product, Program and Planet’ [Village Well 2009, p. 9].

Is it confusing that the word ‘Place’ is itself included in the list of ingredients that make up a place? Is the term ‘tautological’ sufficient to describe this anomaly?

In fact, it begs the question: Wasn’t the place they’re purporting to make already there?
If not, where did the sound of the sea come from that our grandfather heard in 1937? And exactly what void-like absence is capable of producing the luminous pollen filaments which billow along the point every spring?

Due to its apparent failure to account for the place already in existence before the potential existence of the ‘place’ that they had taken it upon themselves to make, I wonder if Village Well’s ‘Place Essence Report’ isn’t a belated corporate manifestation of the dreaded *terra nullius*. As Garbutt has pointed out: ‘terra nullius as a legal fiction could not be imagined and legislated until the land was imagined terra localis’ [2011, p. 199]. I wonder though, and only half facetiously, whether or not something deeper is at play. Maybe the ‘Place Essence Report’ actually embodies Village Well’s unconsciously metaphysical view of the world, and the vague imprecision of its language implies the presence of some unseen spirit realm, a possible unexplained foundry that produced all these supposedly indescribable phenomena that have been just waiting like sculptor’s clay for Village Well’s particular skill-set to arrive.

Things such as *gannet, myrtle beech, crayfish, bullant, bluegum, wattlebird, sheoak, bandicoot, nesophila*...

By way of illustrating a pertinent contrast it is purposeful to abut such conjecture on the ‘place-making’ approach found in Village Well’s ‘Place Essence Report,’ which in its own way assumes a temporal node resembling *tabula rasa*, with an excerpt from a book published by an Aboriginal Australian author, David Unaipon, in 1929. *Native Legends* includes the following explanation for the coming of humans to the earth:

…when the appointed period arrived Spirit Man made the Great Decision and adventure to be clothed with earthly body of flesh and blood, his Spirit Consciousness experienced a great change, for he was overshadowed by another self, the Subjective Consciousness, which entirely belongs to the Earth and not to the Sacred Realm of Spirit, Immortal dwelling place, just at the threshold of the Greater Spirit, the Father of all Mankind – Eternal Home. He began to realise that
his Spirit Self was controlled by an earthly Subjective Consciousness which bound him to earth’s environment with all its blessing, disappointment, discomfort and its pain and sorrow. Being a stranger in a strange land he found it most difficult to adapt himself to earth’s environment. His Spirit Self began to fret and pine for its Heavenly Home. The Living Creatures of the Earth saw his plight and were moved with pity and sympathy.

[Unaipon 1929, pp. 4-5]

I include this passage as a telling, and, given the status of *Native Legends* as the first ever paper book written by an Aboriginal Australian, profoundly symbolic illustration of the cultural distance between the ‘creation mythology’ of a Narrandjeri elder like Unaipon and the Village Well approach to ‘placemaking’. The absurdity of Village Well’s blank slate view of landscape is further compounded when we consider E.O. Wilson’s point that ‘humanity did not soft-land into the teeming biosphere like an alien from another planet’ [1993, p. 39]. There is a clear gulf between the multidimensional ingredients that make up an Aboriginal sense of country – ‘people, animals, plants, Dreamings, underground, earth, soils, minerals and waters, surface water, and air’ [Rose 2004, p. 153] – and the point made by Anne-Britt Gran in her essay ‘Staging Places as Brands’ that in the era of twenty-first-century cultural tourism ‘all places have now entered the communication industry’ [2010, p. 23]. Indeed, Unaipon’s totemic vision is illustrative also of Garbutt’s reflection that the term ‘local’ is a plural and not a singular noun’ [Garbutt 2011 p. 214]. The postcolonial, Anglo-Indigenous landscape, or polyscape, will always be a palimpsest.

†

The town of Lorne itself was named in 1871, in honour of the marriage of the Marquis of Lorne from Argyleshire in Scotland to Queen Victoria’s sixth daughter, Princess Louise. However, Point Grey (the supposed *yet-to-be-a-place* of Village Well’s ‘Place Essence Report’), being itself a more noticeable outcrop of the land into the sea – especially when viewed from a ship – was given its
English name well before this. According to research conducted by esteemed geomorphologist Dr Eric Bird in the Apollo Bay Historical Society and documented in his ‘Place Names on The Coast of Victoria’ [2006], the name was most likely coined in 1846, by surveyor George Smythe, in honour of the Portuguese-born George Grey, Governor of South Australia from 1841 to 1845.

Nicholas Baudin, the French explorer and cartographer, and leader of the Napoleonic expedition to map the coast of Australia, sailed past current day Lorne in March 1802. His expedition is documented in *The Journal of post Captain Nicolas Baudin* [Baudin 1974]. Although he was in many prescient respects ambivalent about the colonial project, particularly the British colonial project [Fornaserio 2016], in an onomastic fervour typical of hydrographers of the era Baudin bestowed French names on numerous features of the coast as he sailed past, most of which have been forgotten but some of which have been retained to the present day. Curiously he recorded no name for Lorne nor the *yet-to-be-a-place* that has come to be known as Point Grey, but as is clear in the ‘Early Navigators of Bass Strait 1770-1803’ map produced by the Australian and New Zealand Map Society in 2010, he was inspired to call the headland just northeast of Lorne *Pointe des Souffleurs*, or ‘Point of the Blowers’. These days that headland is known locally as ‘Cinema Point’, but I like to think that in choosing his name Baudin somehow presaged the kind of hubris contained in Village Well’s ‘Place Essence Report’. It’s far more likely of course that *Pointe des Souffleurs* refers to whales seen blowing from their spouts as he passed by.

†

Only a few months before our grandfather’s arrival at the Grand Pacific Hotel in his Standard Tourer he had emerged alone one morning from the front door of his brick and weatherboard house in Wishart Street, East Kew, Melbourne. Between the door and the gate out onto the street was a narrow pathway. On either side of the pathway were a series of white standard rose bushes, which he had planted for his young wife Rita not long after they were married. Rita had a particular love of
white roses. Now our grandfather, a public servant of the Lands Department, a secretary of the Victorian Athletics Association who was born a long way inland at Hyammi near the family farm at Mologa in 1884, bent down to pull out each of the white rose bushes one by one with his bare hands.

I have been told how quiet and gentlemanly he was, not inarticulate as such but not prone to gales of expressiveness either. I have inherited the notion that silence, rather than words, was his medium. The rests, or spaces in-between words. As such he has always existed for me in a quietude with its own very personal harmonic. His wife had died that morning. Her body lay still in the house. He had three children: two teenage daughters, and a younger son, Adrian, our father. He was known to his friends as Bill Day and pulling up the white roses was the only way Bill Day knew how, on that well-mannered street in East Kew, to howl like the wind.

†

Our grandmother was only in her thirties. She had been sick for about a year before she died. Our grandfather had looked after her at home and our father, who turned ten on the day she died, shared a bed with her during that final year. I’m not sure which of his friends recommended, a few weeks later, that Bill get away on his own for a few days down at Lorne. Their logic, as it was told to me by his second daughter, my Aunt Joan, was that he needed a spell from work and the responsibilities of his new predicament as a single parent. He had had no time on his own to recover from what he had endured. So things were arranged: a room at the Grand Hotel, a week’s leave from the Lands Department, and his two older daughters to look after young Adrian.

Those anonymous friends who sent him to the coast, their names lost now, fallen through time’s perforations in the pages of our family history, had no way of knowing what they were setting in train. But it was surely a good thing they had arranged and it has always had a famous companion story in my mind. In 1910
Henry Lawson was also sent by a group of his friends for a break at Mallacoota when he had come out of Darlinghurst Gaol. The south coast was unfamiliar to him. The small amount he wrote about it, a few ballads and prose sketches, is full of typical Lawson melancholia but is also noteworthy for being ventilated by an occasional breeze of healing air. ‘To A Fellow Bard Camping Out’ of 1910 reads:

Free from Fortune’s slings and arrows,
From all thoughts of rent or meal,
Where the islets creeks and narrows
Teem with fish and swarm with teal.
[Lawson 1984, p. 479]

You could not say that the funds raised to send Lawson away for a break significantly altered the course of his life, but as in the case of my grandfather Bill, the gesture was appreciated at the time and seemed to have the desired effect.

†

Sometimes the effects of such acts of kindness persist beyond the moment and for many years to come. From the top-storey sea-facing rooms of the hotel the view is still beautiful in the present day. I drive the few bends around the Ocean Road from my home in the riverflat below the Split Point lighthouse in Aireys Inlet. I take a room in the Grand Pacific for the night to see it all over again for myself. The windows face east across blue water beyond the point and the pier back towards Split Point, also to the northeast through the tops of the blue gums on Scotchman’s Hill. Across the gentle arc and frith of Louttit Bay you look directly over to the timbered hills of what is nowadays known locally as North Lorne. This Grand Hotel, built in 1879, was an outpost of empire, a framing of natural wonders, a taming of a treacherous sea. Despite the many ships that had become wrecked on the coast, the cove of Lorne quite literally had its back to the wildest weather and a navigational light always in view. But being out on the southern edge of the point, the hotel is less protected. It is closer to the experience of the
sublime so sought after by the exponents of early tourism. It catches the full brunt of the southerlies and the glancing edge of the south-westerlies whilst the centre of the town can remain immune. And when the strong easterly hits, no-one, either at the edge or in the centre, can escape the whirling grain of salt, foam and stipple that the sea brings to the air. The immense scale of the ocean and its interaction and overlap with the land is without strict definition or boundary. It is full of what landscape historian John Stilgoe describes as ‘proper vastness, dictionary vastness’, which ‘lacks edges, stunning eye and numbing brain with boundary-less immensity, with infinite extension’ [1994, p. 20]. Elements interleave, the air becomes grained with salt mist and spray, things waft, glim, loom, billow, incur, floating free in littoral space and tidal time, in size and volume. Previously clear physical ligatures and visual contours are confused. The streaky and stippled theatre of the shore becomes a metaphor for the way meaning continually escapes our desire for clarity, category, and classification.

Apposite to this ineluctable atmosphere at the heart of our biospherical reality is Edmund Burke’s ironic comment in *A Philosphic Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* that ‘a clear idea is another name for a little idea’ [2015, p. 45]. The following poem, composed spontaneously while I was writing *The Grand Hotel*, also seems apt:

*When the tree becomes an exquisite line drawing*

*The sky a meteorological map*

*The wallaby the living litmus of an experimentation*

*The bird a word*

*When the leaves begin to be counted*

*As if they never rust or fall*

*As if they are never reengendered*

*By the tree-host, which is an item*

*Of Linnaen classification*

*When the uses of bark are transcribed*

*The rhythms of the wind made numerical*

*When the light-creep becomes a parabolic curve approximating a*
It is time to leave the riverbank
For unknown afternoon lands, people, and other indescribable things
- Author’s Notebook, 2009

Right there amongst the awesome scale of nature and the wild unpredictability of life, the Grand Pacific Hotel offers a viewing platform, an illusion of settled space, an ornamented haven, a late Victorian parenthesis built out of Erskine River stone, Gadabanud clay bricks, and colonial mortar.

†

It seems strange staying in the hotel on what essentially is my home turf. It feels in itself tautological, or like I’m an imposter. So, at dinner time, rather than going downstairs and suffering the blandishments of the staff, I step outside and take a stroll down to the restaurant by the pier. I drink a coffee at the bar and enjoy some banter with Sammy Gazis, the restaurant’s owner, who I know from the many years I spent working in the fisherman’s co-op next door. Then I walk across town on the rocks and beach at low tide to eat with the godmother of my youngest son at her house in North Lorne. We have a pleasant time. Lindy leaves the front door open to the surf across the road as we talk. I listen as much to it as to her. Perhaps she does too. Around 9 pm I say goodbye.

On the walk back I am annoyed by the bright strip-lights they installed when they built the new promenade-pier in 2007, around the time GORCC was considering the commissioning of Village Well’s ‘Place Essence Report’. The pier is lit up like an airport runway except only flesh-and-blood birds want to land. The lights are good for catching squid, but not for much else. They detract from the night sky, the stars. Heather Le Griffon, in her study of the failed Bunting Dale Aboriginal Mission at nearby Birregurra, pays homage to the original inhabitants of this area and the devastation they endured during the years of the first
European settlement. Their view of the stars as the campfires of their ancestors is embedded in the title of her book, *Campfires at The Cross* [2006].

I walk the beach and savour the particular quiet of closed shops. When I arrive back at the Pacific, I go straight through the foyer and up to my room. I make myself a cup of tea and get into bed. I think about playing some Gigli on my iPad, but read Raffaele La Capria’s *Capri Or No Longer Capri* instead. In *Capri Or No Longer Capri* La Capria deals specifically with the alternately garish and melancholy effects that an overlay of tourism at industrial levels has on his sense of memory and place. He writes of how the island of Capri becomes in itself a metaphor for the dissolution of a society seemingly hell-bent on the exploitation of nature. I lie in the hotel bed and read about him climbing through the cypresses of the Via di Sopromonte. I see the luminous sea-stacks, or *faraglioni*, rising in the azure Tyrrhenian waters that the literature, paintings and music of Capri have inserted in my mind. For half an hour or so I travel with La Capria into the mythological space of the island’s famous blue grotto. But then the moment comes when I close the book, turn out the light and lay my head on the pillow.

†

gannet, myrtle beech, crayfish, bull ant, blue gum, wattlebird, sheoak, bandicoot, nesophila...

Pull these words out by their roots and see how little soil is clinging to them here. Pull the very same words out by their roots in old England (gannet, myrtle and beech, wattlebird, sheoak) in France (crayfish, bull and ant, blue and gum) in Andhra Pradesh (bandicoot), in ancient Rome (nesophila), and you could be sitting around the campfires of the ancestors for at least a thousand and one nights.
Perhaps what Ivr Teibel had discovered in his *Psychologically Ultimate Seashore* was not so much the modern concept of ambient music, but the ancient resonance of the amniotic grotto. Respected psychoacoustic research overlaps to some extent with the smarm of new age ‘healing ocean’ CDs in its correlation of the effects of sound with our somatic preconditioning. It shows that the chain of our psychoacoustic responses to life is predicated on the fact that hearing is not only a biological but a perceptual activity. It begins in the realm of nano-physics, with the fact that all atomic matter vibrates [Leeds 2010]. The frequency of these vibrations produces sound, which, amongst other things, can ultimately be moulded into what we call music. *In utero* the human ear begins to form almost immediately after conception and is fully grown and functioning after only 16 weeks of gestation inside the womb. Indeed, according to influential otolaryngologist Dr Alfred Tomatis: ‘The ear’s first function in utero is to govern the growth of the rest of the physical organism’ [Leeds 2010b, para 6]. It follows then that it is during this formative period that we begin our life as *listeners* to the atomic frequencies of life, for at this early stage we are *listeners* more than we are seers, or sniffers, or touchers, speakers or thinkers. The sound we hear assists in the actual growth of our brain and nervous system. *In utero* all is fluid sound, we hear the rhythm of our mother, her voice as she speaks to us, and we vaguely perceive, *by listening*, the enigma of a wider world coming towards us through a thin membrane of flesh and blood. Encased in the maternal body we are immersed in the sonic energy of life. There are no plastics like there are in the anthropocenic sea, and no technology other than that which our mysteriously organic existence has made.

By simply re-presenting the sound of the sea in 1969, Teibel’s *Environments 1* struck a fundamental chord, and not just with the so-called ‘hippies’. By leaving out any form of human musicianship other than sound treatments in the studio, *Environments 1* placed us in proximity to an original mode of *entrainment*, which is a psychoacoustic term used to describe how sounds change ‘the rate of brain waves, breaths, or heartbeats from one speed to another’ [Leeds 2010c, para 5]. If
one is prepared to believe that the womb, or amniotic grotto, feels to the foetus like a natural and safe place, providing it with everything it needs as it grows towards the state of maturity required for it to encounter the wider world, then one must also credit that the resembling *sish sish* of the ocean at night quite possibly triggers in us some kind of elemental memory of that prior condition.

†

Issuing from this amniotic dream there is a place without a written name. For one or maybe two days of the year, usually in February, there is also a sea without a wave. This is the moment of the seine-net and the flounder-spear, when the kiss of tide on sand drops to a whisper, when the ocean bed is visible, when the deeper shapes can be made out. This still weather of a lake-like ocean comes at the tapering end of a run of northerlies, and has always reminded me of Blaue Reiter artist Franz Marc’s 1911 painting, *The Sleeping Bull*, otherwise known as *The Steer* or *The White Bull*. As Marc’s painting shows, there are moments in life, indeed in every day, when the stereotypic mode of brute power is withdrawn. Even Polyphemus must dream.

The earth moves elliptically. It is neither flat nor round and some integers of time have names dreamt in the memory only. Some have no names at all. In Greek, the source word *elleiptikos* implies a defectiveness in all this, but *elleiptikos* in turn comes from *elleipein*, which actually means to ‘leave out’, to ‘fall short’. The implication is the truth of imperfection.

A stitch is missed. A space is created. Some things are beyond description. These spaces encourage human yearning. There is a yearning for explanation, which often results in science, or what is called mythology. But there is also a biophilic yearning to somehow sensually match the feeling or physical *sensation* of the space. The space our grandmother’s death left behind. The space in our grandfather’s heart that the sound of the ocean filled. This leads us to singing.
It follows that true songs of this space exist firstly as caves, contours, passing gullies. We feel their magnetism and tumble towards them. But they come and go, they dip and rise, teasing the solidity of the canon. They are harmonics of the world’s fundamental note, indispensable in the timbre of the music of our dreams.

*Did you hear the ocean last night?*

†

It took me a long time to work this out, the partially obscured signal that has come down through the bloodlines, the story that dwells as if subliminally, like the thread, or *hypha*, of an Otway mycelium, or like the sibilance of the ocean itself, under everything I have written. Perhaps precisely because it is a story that is positioned so subliminally in the family, just like the ocean at night, it has magnetised my imagination. Long before 1841, when Bill Day’s grandparents (my great-great-grandparents, James and Mary Day) arrived off the ship in the colony of Port Phillip and settled just up the road from where I now live within the semi-fictional geography of my Mangowak novels, the cove of Lorne had another name. The beach sat like a crescent moon carved into the steep edge of the forest, a foyer to Gadabanud country, or King Parrot country. In the language of the Wadawurrung across the bay at Split Point, the word for King Parrot is *Yukope* [Pascoe 2003, p. 69]; in the Peek Whurrong, or ‘kelp lip’ language further west of the Otways around Port Fairy, it is *Waatuurong* [Dawson 1981, p. *liv*]. But the ancient local word for the cove of Lorne itself has been lost. It has become a word more like a fallen star, mingling among the sound of the waves in my grandfather’s ear…

†
If the lost word feels like a falling star it follows, in a conflation of the metaphor entirely consistent with biophilia, that the spirits of the campfire ancestors of the night sky are always descending and walking among us. These are the type of personages, the living, dying people of the deep amniotic past of this country, that it is natural for a human with a love of the area to have a hunger to meet. But can I presume that of others who live around me? Certainly not. So then, I ask myself: is every song, every story, every poem and novel I write, a cooee into the darkness? Or to put it another way, as Paul Carter does in *The Sound In Between*, ‘Sounds always come from elsewhere; the voice is always an answer’ [1992 p. 26].

I cock my ear, I raise my antennae, I watch watch watch, listen listen listen…

†

It was not the *sight* of the blue sea in Lorne’s famously limpid light that had the biggest impact on the solitary widower in 1937. Rather it was the *sound* of the sea at night.

When our grandfather returned to East Kew after his week at the Grand Pacific he said two things to his young boy Adrian about his trip away. The first thing that had struck him was the voice of an Italian tenor that he had heard playing in the hotel. He would listen almost religiously to that voice for the rest of his days. The second thing that had struck him – and a magical thing it must have been to the 10-year-old ears of my father, who like his Dad had never seen the ocean – was the sound of the sea under his pillow at night. My father was told it was the most beautiful sound on earth.

Perhaps partly because my grandfather was a man who didn’t usually express his innermost feelings and sensations, this testimony of his seems to have left a deep emotional groove running into the family’s future. At the time, in the house without its mother, it immediately took on the quality of a myth. Yes, there was
another world, a world transcending the pain and extraction of death, a world
apart from the dry parsimonious paddocks of Mologa and the crowded bustle of
Melbourne. It was a natural world, a beautiful world; a world, as it happened, in
closer proximity to our Irish and Sicilian ancestors. In that place, the sound of the
sea came each night like a mother’s lullaby.

†

Our grandfather’s anecdote about the sound of the sea under his pillow at night
became an alternate harmonic to unspeakable grief amongst the architraves and
eaves of my father’s childhood home. They could all hear it now, his father,
himself, and his sisters: the sound of the ocean at night washing through a city
wedged between the deprivations of the Great Depression and the brutalities of
the Second World War. Even just the idea of the sound became a soothing
flageolet in the house-timbre, a high and consolatory correspondence produced
from a fundamentally low note of sadness and pain.

In the years after 1937, everyday life in Wishart Street, East Kew, never became
normalised. My grandfather and my father’s elder sisters were loving towards the
boy, but the mother he had slept with through that last year of her life, the mother
who passed away on his tenth birthday, had entered her afterlife as an all-
encompassing yet subliminal sensation. For my grandfather it was an assuaging
memory: the surf under his pillow in the high front room of the Grand Pacific at
Lorne. For my father: a wonderful tale, a sonic lure, an acoustic myth. A fabulous
antidote to the sharp fact of her smell still permeating his pyjamas and pillowslips.
As soon as he was old enough he would head himself straight for the coast.

The sound of the ocean at night. Her loss was its key. Everything was wrong, but
it would also be alright because far from the city a beauty equivalent to hers
existed in a small cove at the end of a winding ocean road. The stars shone at
night above a Grand Hotel on the point, and you could fall asleep and dream to
the sound of sish sish, sish sish…
Chapter 2 - One True Note?

‘I was born very young in a very old world.’
Erik Satie (epigraph to The Grand Hotel)

1.

In Ian D Clark’s *Aboriginal Languages and Clans: An Historical Atlas of Western and Central Victoria* [1990], in the section entitled ‘Wada wurrung language history and demographic decline’, there is a list of variant spellings of the name of this country and its people. Wadawurrung country, or Wadawurrung tabayl, in southwestern Victoria, is bordered by Werribee River in the east, Ballarat and Beaufort in the north, and the Painkalac Creek here at Aireys Inlet in the southwest. Removing mistranscriptions from the list, Clark has identified 133 different recorded spellings of the word:


A single word. 133 versions. That the European colonists privileged a written Roman alphabet over oral communication, and that the Wadawurrung language at the time of first contact in the early 1800s was exclusively oral, are of course key reasons for this polyphony of misnomers. Perhaps though, as a tool for understanding how complex the realities of colonial dispossession are, this list amounts to a compelling metaphor. It denotes both the pitfalls and the possibilities of trying to interpret this place in the exogenous language of written English.

I can read this list as both tragic and musical. It is also inherently farcical, or tragi-comical. Also, as a pure coincidence of the number of words – 133 – the list has taken on an association for me with Wallace Stevens’ prismatic poem ‘13 Ways Of Looking At A Blackbird’ [1990, p. 92]. Try, just for starters, ‘133 Ways Of Looking At A Heartland’, or ‘133 Ways Of Misunderstanding Tabayl’. In its permutative nature the list feels like a programming code of what some academics call our ‘anglo-indigenous’ landscape. Full of such close orthographic modulations, it requires the most intensely ironic concentration to transcribe the 133 spellings precisely.

†

Halldor Laxness, the Icelandic novelist who broke with modern tradition by writing in his own native Icelandic language rather than colonial Danish, won the Nobel Prize in 1955 just before the publication of his novel The Fish Can Sing
In the novel, an opera singer named Gardar Holm, a local boy made good in the opera houses of Europe, intermittently returns to his native soil with the promise that he will honour his countrymen by singing for them. As the singer repeatedly fails to fulfil this promise, the myth of his artistry burgeons to fill the space left by the absence of his song. The myth is further encouraged by Gardar Holm’s philosophy, which he bestows on the novel’s young narrator Alfgrímur, that life is the quest to attain the ‘one true note’ [2008, p. 139]. The catch is that whoever attains this note will thereafter cease to sing. Thus Laxness, who with inspired and seemingly superhuman effort returned his island’s literature back to the autochthonous tongue of its ancient sagas, knew both the vast energy that such a quest for authenticity requires as well as the illusory, even impossible, nature of the task.

Language, like the wind, is hard to pin down. It relies on movement for its existence, as we rely on breath for life. The sound of language also often reminds me of water. It forms, runs, braids, pools, knocks, rustles, rushes, flows… Like a river it is always moving, even when it appears to be still. Its currents are endlessly various but the river itself remains the sum total and singular shape of those currents. The river is cadence.

Is the language I write in – English – a second language on this littoral where we live?

Or a third?

†

John Berger, in a small essay called ‘Self Portrait,’ which he published just before his death in early 2017, writes that, ‘Mother Tongue is our first language, first heard as infants from the mouths of our mothers’ [2016, p. 5]. But what if ‘Mother Tongue’ was not to be attributed to the individual mother, but more
ambiently to what the Greeks called Gaia, or ‘Mother Earth’? In this way, through the membrane of the womb, the words and sounds spoken by the human mother are recognised as part of a wider array of environmental sounds. Thus, we can understand the womb as our first auditory learning space, and the sounds coming to us from the as yet unseen realm outside the womb as our first metaphysics.

If, as otolaryngologist Dr Alfred Tomatis maintains, the human ear is fully grown and functioning after only 16 weeks’ gestation and ‘the ear’s first function in utero is to govern the growth of the rest of the physical organism’ [cited in Leeds 2010b], then it follows that from such beginnings we learn to connect the close rhythms of our own blood with the mirror rhythms of a vast world. We begin too to decipher the repeating sonic agreements by which the first humans around us chose to communicate information within that vast biophonic sphere.

Always underneath though, before and surrounding these agreed-upon phonemes and words, is the music we are made of, the first symphony of sound, or language, of our first place.

Perhaps Berger’s sentence could therefore be recomposed:

Mother Tongue Earth is our first language, first heard as infants from the mouths of our mothers conceived afresh into this new environment or life-world.

†

Noam Chomsky qualifies his notion that ‘a human being or any complex organism has a system of cognitive structures that develop much in the way the physical organs of the body develop’ by agreeing that ‘they grow under particular environmental conditions, assuming a specific form that admits of some variation’ [Osiatynski 1984, p. 95].
To what extent the variations determined by environment can be embodied in written language is a concern of mine here. David Abram, in a foundational text for the discipline of ecotaxonomy, describes how, in the ancient Semitic cultures in which the first alphabets were developed, vowels were left out of written texts in order to avoid desacralising the world they described [1997, pp. 239-244]. The twenty-two letters of the Hebrew aleph-beth, for instance, were all consonants. This was some kind of early negotiated compromise between oral and written culture, whereby the air, or breath of life, intrinsic to the production of vowel sounds (as opposed to the sculptural physicality of consonants relying on the palate, lips, teeth, tongue, etc.) was excluded from texts to avoid the dangers of abstraction from the very life-world they were attempting to transpose into script. The reader of these ancient texts was forced then to creatively engage with the strictly consonantal content by choosing which vowel sound went where in each word. In this way, Abram believes,

> a Hebrew text could not be experienced as a double – a stand-in or substitute – for the sensuous corporeal world. The Hebrew letters and texts were not sufficient unto themselves; in order to be read, they had to be added to, enspirited by the reader’s breath. The invisible air, the same mystery that animates the visible terrain, was also needed to animate the visible letters, to make them come alive and to speak. [p. 242]

By the reader having to insert the vowel sounds into the exclusively consonantal architecture of each written word the text required an active, even performative participation for it to attain complete cogency, thereby admitting, and in part circumventing, the increased distancing from the psychoacoustic life-world which is built into written texts as compared to oral speech. The refusal to print the vowel sounds which rely for their manufacture on the wider ubiquity of a more-than-human environment ensured not only that the reader was ‘enlisted as an agent of the writing’ [Rasula 2002, p. 11] but also that written texts did not atomise or ‘cool’ into mere annotations of creation. Rather, they were always coming-into-being, in the mind and on the tongue of the reader, or ‘wreader’ [Rasula 2002, p. 11]. In this way, to transpose Robert Lowell’s classic definition of poetry to the wider question of language itself, the text maintained its status as an ‘event, not the record of an event’ [Vendler 1980, p. 167].
There is a telling scene in the English writer Alan Garner’s uncanny William Buckley novel *Strandloper* [1996] that relates to this point. Garner’s books are very much driven by his topophilia, or powerful attachment to place. As such his work is chorographic, saturated as it is with a precise and mythic swirl of endemic rocks, meres, trees and meteorological phenomena, and also with the vernacular palimpsest of the historical and pre-historical cultural landscape of his native Cheshire. The story of William Buckley, who famously escaped the putative Australian colonial settlement at present-day Sorrento in Port Phillip Bay in 1803, and lived for 32 years with the Wadawurrung before rejoining the Anglosphere not long after the first settlement of Melbourne, only found its place in Garner’s creative orbit because Buckley was originally from his part of the world. What Garner brings to Buckley’s story – which has always been claimed as an exclusively Australian story – is the idea that there was potentially deep sylvan dreaming on both sides of the cultural divide.

In the scene from *Strandloper*, Buckley is on the beach at Beangala, a place on the Bellarine peninsula in southwest Victoria these days known as Indented Head. He is terribly homesick. To assuage his longing, he writes the name of his childhood sweetheart back in England in the sand. Het, he writes, short for Esther. A Wadawurrung elder of Garner’s imagining, who he calls Nullamboin, asks Buckley: ‘Why do you cut sand?’ [1996, p. 138] Buckley explains that this writing or ‘cutting sand’ is a form of naming, a type of dreaming that can also be an expression of knowledge. Nullamboin is skeptical but wants to know more. He gets Buckley to write other words, the words of Wadawurrung deities, including Bundjil the eagle, in the sand. Verifying that these words can also be cut into rock or wood Nullamboin reacts dramatically as the future ramifications of this new and superficial way of transmitting culture dawns on him.

Nullamboin rubs the sand and strides off: ‘“Then all will see without knowledge”, he cries, “without teaching, without dying into life! Weak men will sing! Boys will have eagles! All shall be mad!”’ [p. 140]
After reading *Strandloper*, and also some of the history around the desacralising Enclosure Acts of England that took place in Buckley’s time, it seems logical that in many ways the pre-invasion Wadawurrung customs and beliefs would have been more familiar to this Cheshire bricklayer, who had grown up with many traditional and pantheistic customs of his region still extant, than they would be to us anthropocenes today. The issue of the written word, however, and the idea that its utility could completely destroy the timely pathways of knowledge and landlore, was perhaps at least one gulf that remained between Buckley and his aboriginal lifesavers. If knowledge was something to be attained through certain careful techniques, like nectar from a comb, if it was to be ritually developed like the shapeliness of maturing skin or the muscle of a growing arm, then time and experience, *events in the landscape*, were the true etymology of the language-creature that served as the carrier of this knowledge.

There is a consistency here between Nullamboin’s fear and Abram’s idea that the air, breath, or wind-mind, the medium upon which our very existence relies, and therefore through which our consciousness and cognitive functioning operates, is at risk of becoming obscured, alienated, or even forgotten about, due to the cultural centrality of the written word since the emergence of the vowel-inclusive Greek alphabet in the eighth century BC [pp. 225-260]. It might be said that the truncation that inevitably takes place between the world-in-itself and the language which describes it, is less pronounced in fully embodied cultures whose language has evolved not only biophonically but orally within its specifically contoured region. It follows therefore that the onomatopeia often evident in Wadawurrung descriptors – *Parrwang* (magpie), *go-im* (kangaroo), even *yern* (moon) [Blake 1998] – is evidence of that lessening of truncation. It also follows that a writer attempting to write, or sing, a home landscape in grammatical units of agreed meaning, would be drawn towards words that reduce the truncation effect of language by actually *sounding* the world around them. In this way the very atmosphere we breathe becomes the singing instrument of our cultural expression. Story is given birth to, as if it is flesh itself. As Merleau Ponty maintains in his *Phenomenology of Perception* – first published in 1962, the same year in which the Commonwealth Electoral Act was amended to provide that ‘Indigenous people could enrol to vote in federal elections if they wished’ – a word is not the ‘mere
sign of objects and meanings’ but ‘inhabits things and is the vehicle of meanings’ [1978, p. 178]. It is in fact ‘the essence of the thing it describes’ and ‘resides in it on the same footing as its colour or form’ [p. 178].

In other words, the descriptor and the object of description in any given phrase, lyric, or sentence, enact a two-way exchange, as in the umbilical bond between mother and child, or the sensory communion between landscape and the dweller within it.

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When Charles Taylor cites Humboldt’s expression of ‘a feeling that there is something which the language does not directly contain, but which the (mind/soul), spurred on by language, must supply and the (drive), in turn, to couple everything felt by the soul with a sound’ [Taylor 2016 p. 177], he seems to point us in the direction of the inherent mystery of the source of language. Taylor also contends that ‘it is not only poets, novelists and artists who feel this, although it is the very stuff of their existence, but also just about everyone at some point in their lives’ [p. 178]. Chomsky too, in regard to what he terms ‘creative use’ of language, maintains that it remains ‘as much of a mystery now as it did centuries ago, and may turn out to be one of those ultimate secrets that ever will remain in obscurity, impenetrable to human intelligence.’ [2009, p. 200]

The idea of an impenetrable or mysterious source of language has an affinity with many ancient-ongoing Indigenous cultures who privilege the unseen over the seen. When we hear David Prosser, a Yaegl man from the lower reaches of the Clarence River on the north coast of New South Wales, citing Gamilaroi elder Aunty Rose Fernando’s declaration that ‘language is our soul’, we begin to enter again the realm of the unseen. Prosser says that when he first heard that phrase of Aunty Rose Fernando’s – *language is our soul* – ‘it instantly entered the deepest
part of my heart. And as I continued to think about what she had said I realised that that part of my heart was my soul’ [Browning 2017].

Though Prosser’s words are not meant to be understood physiologically they nevertheless speak anatomically of unseen sources, thereby implying the embodied nature of our linguistic acquisition in lived environments. As such they also ask us to think in different ways about our 133 written misnomers. It is as if the colonial and postcolonial language collectors of Victoria, who in this context we might ironically call *stenographers of country*, were attempting to perform a task with the wrong instruments. Instead of listening within the context of unseen sources, or the ‘deepest part of the heart’, they were attempting to *capture* merely linguistic *material*. Instead of understanding the words in their full bio-etymological context they were reducing them from a pollen-like existence amidst the living air to a ham-fisted afterlife on the static page. Whatever their many and various cultural, religious and economic motivations, they were indeed attempting to *pen* Indigenous culture, in both senses of that word. This penning impulse led in turn to the inscription of inadequate imitations, to the writing down of brittle dictations with tragic limitations.

Even allowing for the fluid situation-dependent semantics of languages such as Wadawurrung, where the sound or meaning of a word can change depending on time, place and other culturally significant factors or events, Merleau-Ponty’s ‘essence of the thing’ when applied to our 133 transcribed misnomers becomes an essence of attenuation and misunderstanding rather than of the object, action, feeling, place or language it is intending to signify. We are left with a new series of meanings, a lexicon of glitches that desynchronises human culture with place. It is literally a tragic collision of the vehicles of meaning.

For instance, the list of 133 spellings of Wadawurrung is full of unintentional puns. Such as *Wadawio*. As in: ‘What do we owe?’ Or the constant repetition of the suffix ‘wrong’, in words like *Waterwrong, Woolowrong, or Witswrong*.

Another way of looking at the list is as a great ironic sounding-out of the difficulties of writing from, and about, a particular place within ‘anglo-indigenous country’. As I do.
Aireys Inlet, or Mangowak (meaning: good place to hunt swans), is the southwestern border of the no longer extant Turaltja clan of the Wadawurrung, also the southwestern border of Wadawurrung country itself, also the southwestern border of the wider Kulin nation [Pascoe 2003]. It is within the boundaries of the Surfcoast Shire, also the cadastral county of Grant, the State electorate of Polwarth, the federal electorate of Corangamite, the state of Victoria and the federated nation of Australia. It was when I was a teenager, growing up on the banks of the Painkalac in Aireys Inlet that reception of the ocean landscape, and the flash of inspiration Elaine Scarry has called ‘radiant ignition’ [2001, p. 77], began to feel indivisible for me.

Benganak goopmala-ilk talk-getyaweel Nganyakee ba deerdabeel laa-getyaweel
Benganak beetyarra-ik waema woorr-woorr werreeyt-ik

The sky split open, showing the beauty of the first sunrise. They were so overjoyed to see the light and feel the warmth of the sun’s heat, they burst into song.

From ‘Magpie’ – told and translated by Uncle David Tournier [Victorian Aboriginal Corporation for Languages 2004, p. 48]

Looking along the sepia tone of the Painkalac and down the line of the coast into the southwest, past Grassy Creek and Lorne to the towering headlands, or Taenarea, of the Otways, I felt both a freedom and an agitation, a filling up and an emptying out, a thrilling impetus and a terrible lack. This was different from an experience of the sublime in the Burkean sense, yet as the landscape entered me I was simultaneously filled with a recursive desire to respond, to somehow match
it, or, in a quasi-Pindaric mood I was unconscious of at the time, to pay tribute to it.

Just a few years later, when I was in my early twenties, I wrote a poem which could be construed as an attempt to begin to tackle a crucial aspect of the difficulty of writing about this place in a language forcibly imposed upon it. By doing so I was beginning to attend to my feelings of confusion and unreadiness for the task.

‘Those are not Tuscan hills...’

the land takes away the g
Adds the b
Leaves you wanting to show
By the way you say
That you’re in it, with its
Soil in your ears & shoes
In your hair & tears
It takes away the uni, the g,
The colonization so you’re saying
I’m lovin’ you, I’m headin’ there
It’ll be ok and such is life
And the bird’s real name is not
That compliant import you’ve given it
This is sound this is sense
Those are not Tuscan hills. [Author’s Notebooks 1987]

It is unremarkable that in reaching for a mode of expression to match both the historical context of dispossession, the continuing land grab, and the grand sonic atmosphere of the coastline, I ended up having to turn to Europe, and specifically the Mediterranean, as a negative catalyst. I knew already that the particular numinosity I was experiencing in the landscape could not simply be matched with received ideas, borrowed melody, or Tuscan terza rima. At that time, the late 1980s, there was a fashion for all things Tuscan not only amongst suburban
property developers but also amongst the literary circles of Australia. David Malouf was living in Tuscany, Germaine Greer had a house in Tuscany, Kate Grenville had just set a novel, *Dreamhouse*, in Tuscany. I was already beginning to draw on the Mediterranean as part of my genetic and cultural inheritance (my ancestor Antonio Denerio arrived in Geelong in the 1840s from Riposto in Sicily at around the same time that my other ancestors James and Mary Day arrived in Geelong from Ireland.) But on a trip to France, Italy, Sicily, Greece and Crete in 1987, I also felt how worn the paths had become over there, how exhausted and even trivialised the Mediterranean landscape had become through an economic reliance on the tropes of Romanticism hyped to industrial levels. I had an inkling of an equivalent but fresher dream here at home, albeit with its own mythological antiquity, if only I could begin to listen and to comprehend. It may have seemed right for the older generations of Australian writers and artists to head to England, Europe and America, but I felt that for my own generation, or at least for myself, the time had come to stay put. To stay meant to grapple not only with the possibilities of new melodic dreams but with a dramatic inheritance of expropriation and absence, and a largely unframed contemporary response to the metaphysical landscape. It meant also a technical wrestling with an often atonal and caustic vernacular, and an attempt to find an accurate language for a post-volcanic yet atavistic environment of sulphur-crested screeching, bull-ant bites and tempestuous Bass Strait winters. All this had to be conjoined with the loyalty and affinity I felt for my family’s own linguistic inheritance: from Ireland, from Sicily, and since 1841, from colonial Australia.

The silence in the landscape could be eerie, but the ocean was like a radio, transmitting along the riverflat and into the heath and bush. Like the synchronic transistor radio my character Kooka listens to in the upstairs Sewing Room of the Grand Hotel in my novel of the same name, it spoke to me of unseen things, of wondrous inklings, of battles fought in the past, inklings and battles we weren’t taught about at school. On the ridgelines of wattle, messmate and xanthorrhoea above the cursive shoreline, or down amongst the enveloping frequencies of the tide on the beach, I cupped a hand to my ear and asked the question: *What actually happened? How did we get here and where the hell are those who were here before?*
Where, for instance, were the creation myths, the songs, the arias of word and image that must exist as a response to this very particular atmosphere?

Due to the absence at the time of Indigenous voices in the landscape, what I heard back in response was the sound of the place. It was a wonderful sound, awesome, but it was also disorienting, for it spoke of violence and dishonour.

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In his ‘Self Portrait’ John Berger warns that ‘words, terms, phrases can be separated from the creature of their language and used as mere labels. They can become inert and empty.’ He says that the ‘repetitive use of acronyms is a simple example of this’ [2016, p. 6].

By recomposing Berger’s words – Mother Tongue Earth is our first language, first heard as infants from the mouths of our mothers conceived afresh into this new environment or life-world – I am implying that ‘words, terms, phrases’ ‘become inert and empty’ if their speakers cease listening to the language creature of Gaia, place, or Mother Earth. This has particular implications for someone like me, who writes in English from the once exclusively oral language-place that is the Wadawurrung landscape.

Continuing along the thread of Berger’s thought, the following sentence from his ‘Self Portrait’ becomes a deadly one indeed: ‘Such dead “word-mongering” wipes out memory and breeds a ruthless complacency’ [p. 7].

This is the ‘ruthless complacency’ that is at the heart of the European colonial project in Australia. It is important that we don’t speak of that project as existing only in the past, a point emphasised by Western Australian poet John Kinsella when he says that ‘the writing process is not merely a retrospective consideration’ and that ‘memory belongs to the now’ [Flood 2011]. Understanding this
ongoingness, or synchrony, and the way consequence and residue manufacture new events (which, in turn, create their own consequences and residues) is a crucial and indispensable challenge for the contemporary writer trying to be faithful, or to correspond to the complex language-creature, or *topos*, he or she is born into.

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Largely due to my studies in the Wadawurrung language, which with the permission of Wadawurrung elder and language teacher Uncle David Tournier I now teach at my children’s primary school here in Mangowak, I have come to believe not only that fish can sing, as Halldor Laxness did, but that words come not only from our mother but like rain from the sky. Time and again the Wadawurrung words the children are learning are explicitly onomatopoeic. They sound like the things, and the environments of the things, they describe. *Parrwang* (magpie), *go-im* (kangaroo), *yern* (moon). So, when nearly all our social contracts and agreements in Australia take place in imported English, do we have a problem? The more we fall in love with our country, the more we yearn to understand it, the more we experience the disorientation of the perpetual misnomer in our senses. Ours is a psychogeography of anxiety. A place of weakened literacy. We try 133 different remedies but remain uncertain about them all. And if in the end we revert to ironic forms of shorthand such as bullet-lists (Village Well’s 5 Ps of Placemaking) or spoonerish acronyms (GORCC – Great Ocean Road Coast Committee) we do so not only as efficiency measures and time saving devices, but as expressions of a future in which our Mother Earth may have to shout to be heard. And no matter what word you use for it, we all know what that means.
It is a fact that as a writer in English I ply my craft in the almost complete absence of spoken Wadawurrung language in my home-landscape. Perhaps one day it may feel appropriate to incorporate written Wadawurrung without irony into the prose I create, but the process I am engaged in, of matching my written texts to the cultural landscape in which they have seeded, is taking place in a period of history where, as the 133 mishearings of Wadawurrung show, such usages are fraught and freighted with the mistakes of the past. As such, one advantage of my role as a predominantly oral sharer of Wadawurrung language to the schoolchildren of my Aireys Inlet community is that it helps me to better understand how prose, poetry and song written, spoken and sung in English might evolve in the anglo-indigenous context. With specific reference to the context of my novels, teaching the language helps me think about how those novels can best represent the emotional geography of a colonial Celtic-Mediterranean Australian such as myself, while attending to the magnetic chthonics of the physical place I call home. In this respect my loyalties remain as much with the voices and temperament of my ancestry as with the place and people those ancestors colonised. My words spring from the language-creature of that ancestry just as they lean in and commune with the biophonies and psychoacoustics of place. Thus my novels highlight a demotic and often picaresque Australian vernacular not only in order to lessen the truncated nature of imported English, but because that is in fact the inherited language of my tribe.

And a very frustrating inheritance it can be. One way of demonstrating this frustration is to say that as a graphological equivalent to the poly-timbral sound of the ocean my grandfather heard under his pillow in the Grand Pacific Hotel in 1937, the onomatopeic phrase – *sish sish* – just doesn’t cut it, either as a purely imitative sound or as a unit of transferable meaning. For a start, *sish sish* excludes the wild benthic flare of the oceanic roar. Back from the shelter against the southwesterlies that the cove of Lorne affords, the sound escapes the attempt those letters – *s-i-s-h s-i-s-h* – make. *Sish sish* is only one mood in a vast
temperament, one climatic moment, a hydronym of one geographic contour which is overcome when the body of the listener or the weather shifts and the world is acoustically exposed as an infinite and unpredictable auditorium.

All it takes is a short walk out of the cove. A littoral dérive. Then the sound of the ocean requires a different rightness. A clearer thisness. A more faithful withness.

It can be tumult, clashing, thunderous, fiery. Swell cracks like mortar fire in the midnight rivermouth, the sound of arriving waves soars inland like a billowing sea-fog, flows like the million glowing filaments of land pollen flows, away from the sand of mollusc and kelp towards the marsupial demesne of soily mycelial land. It is orchestral-spray, marine reverb, epic exhalation, galaxial, high. Its sub-bass is a whale, its treble-harmonic is a star. The list of adjectives could go on: amplitudinous, hydrosonic, penumbral, biophonic, roisterous, violent….and on and on, well beyond Laxness’ one true note or the 133 misspellings of Wadawurrung. The list increases in a perpetually yearning way reminiscent of the roots of the word ‘tragedy’ itself – that being the goat song, or Greek trageodia, derived, some say, from the mournful mountainside cry of the male goat for his mate.

Whatever the case, the sound of the ocean cannot be described by sish sish alone.

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It follows then that amidst the roar there arrives a mechanical rumble now, as down the Great Ocean Road comes yet another vehicle, and this one not so solitary-sombre or sish sising as my grandfather’s Standard Tourer of 1937 described in Chapter One. It is now ten years later, 1947. Over the Anglesea River (formerly Swampy Creek, before that Kuarka Dorla, meaning: place to fish for mullet [Pascoe 2003]), comes a bright red Ford courier van, with a long nose and high fenders. Inside are four young larrikins, smoking, carousing, singing. The van is their own bright and bespoke precursor to the ‘Wicked’ vans of our times.
On its ocean-facing panels is written, in semi-professional cursive white script: **Don’t Laugh Madam, Your Daughter May Be In Here.**

Along the postwar road they come, sputtering up the high hill out of Anglesea, scaring even the most pugnacious wattlebirds as they hoot through the ochre cutting at Point Roadknight and on through clouds of moonah and heath toward the next ochre cutting at Urquharts Bluff. The song is repeated in unison, over and over, the bottle passed around, as the van curls through Sunnymead and on towards Aireys Inlet. I can hear their voices:

**We had a good day today today**
**We had a good day today**
**We missed the bus we missed the train**
**A larrkin stole the watch and chain**
**The baby chewed the ticket**
**So we had to pay again, but we**
**Had a good day today today**
**We had a good day today.**

On both sides of the road the heath has flared up into messmates, wattles and ironbarks, which seem to close like a curtain behind the singers as they pass. For me they have entered the sparking-place of fiction, poetry and song, my zone of ‘radiant ignition’. From the downslope past the little ‘top shop’ at the entrance of the town they see the Split Point lighthouse standing on its headland across a swale to their left, with its long tapering white stalk and its fairytale red cap almost the same colour as the van. They’re impressed. The lighthouse is called ‘The White Queen’ [Carr & Cecil 1986]. But the van doesn’t head for the white queen, it moves suddenly in the other direction, veering right into the thick shade of the macrocarpas surrounding the Inlet Hotel.

The singing ends, the engine is turned off. The bar awaits. But for a moment all my father can hear is the sound of the sea.
At some point in the few hours following the arrival of the red Ford van in the Inlet hotel carpark, whether in the bar of the hotel or down amongst the beaded glasswort and swan honks of the river itself, the young pub crawlers from East Kew ran into the lighthouse Bardins. George Albert Bardin was the last keeper of the Split Point lighthouse before the light became automated in 1919. Son of a harbour master at St Helier on the Channel island of Jersey, Bardin had sailed against his will as an 11-year-old from his home island. Once in Australian waters he fell from the mast of the ship, breaking his back and leg. Effectively abandoned in the Williamstown hospital, speaking a Jersey patois and virtually no English, domestic rats ‘ate away one of his heels when he was in the cast’ [Carr & Cecil 1986, p. 82]. Somehow, having survived the ordeal of leaving his home, and the accident on the ship, the young exile eventually managed to find his way into employment with the lighthouse service. He worked on many of the lights in Bass Strait and spent three separate terms at Split Point, which he said was his favourite posting because it reminded him of Jersey, the island he had never wanted to leave.

Since being made redundant by the automation of the lighthouse service, George Bardin had become a regular visitor to the inlet. On that day in 1947 he is camping on the inlet with his son Norman Bardin, Norm’s wife Minna, and their two children Norma and Rodney. For a brief time Norma Bardin had attended St Anne’s Primary School in East Kew with my father. They recognised each other now in the inlet air. I can imagine, from subsequent gatherings that took place in the course of my lifetime, the nature of the surprise, and the jocularity that would have quickly ensued. It wouldn’t have been long at all before the bream of friendship between my father and the Bardin family was well and truly on the hook.

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*Beauty is a defiance of authority.*’ -- William Carlos Williams
In one of our family photo albums there has always existed a black and white picture of my father and his mates posed around the Ford van somewhere along the road of their big adventure in 1947. On the side of the van visible in the photo the words are clear and legible: ‘Don’t Laugh Madam, Your Daughter May Be In Here’. It was not until over 60 years later, while in the process of inventing the sometimes dipsomaniacal cast for my three Mangowak novels, that I learnt from Rodney Bardin that the van in the black and white photograph had actually been bright red and that it had had a second message written on its other side: ‘The Undertaker’s Picnic’.

Rodney Bardin, nine years younger than my father and his mates, described as if it was yesterday the rebellious, picaresque van turning up in the inlet when he was camping there with his family. I had known the black and white photo all my life but this new information seemed to put the blood back into the documentation of memory, to somehow reverse the photographic printing process and bring the moment back to life in my hands.

I don’t know how many days and nights the boys in the red van stayed before they moved on from the inlet towards Lorne, but it was far longer than they expected. They were in luck. Being the last lightkeepers before the era of automation, the Bardins held an esteemed connection to the fledgling town which owed its very emergence to the days when three separate families rotated the 24-hour duties of the light. Three families required a store, a school, a church. A town was born. These town founders were now my father’s riverflat hosts, ushering him back into the landscape not only of his great grandparents James and Mary Day, but of his widower father’s healing grief.

The Bardins and my father and his friends exchanged home brew, muscat, fish, eels, cigarettes, river air. And most importantly – remembering that retreating island shore of Jersey, the boy’s distraught gaze, his falling from the mast, those rats eating his heel in the Williamstown hospital; remembering too my grandfather’s descriptions of his own ‘radiant ignition’ in the Grand Pacific Hotel ten years earlier – they exchanged a sense of place hard won. A sense of place already imbued with colonial nostalgia.
Between the Painkalac bridge and the dune hummock in the south they camped. These days I sit right there in the canoe on the water beside my brother’s eel trap and listen. The sound is explosive. Detonations of the moon. The crackle of the fire, the laughter. The songs. What began as a single salt tear has gathered an ocean. The solitary note of our grandfather’s grief has become joined to the affectionate socialising of our father’s journey towards it.

Herein lies the writer’s challenge, of summoning authentically mixed voices to match the polyphonies of culture and time. This is the ground beneath our feet. A place where *sish sish* is as interchangeable with silence and tragedy as it is with the jocular cry of *whose shout?*

*Time is an unfinished landscape.*
Chapter 3 – Otway Taenarum

‘If the sun and moon should doubt, they’d immediately go out.’
William Blake (epigraph to The Patron Saint Of Eels)

1.

We travel on. To 1988. It is five years after the Ash Wednesday bushfires, which devastated many parts of Victoria, including the coastline of the Eastern Otways. It is also Australia’s Bicentennial year. A young man in his early twenties sits on the step of a small fibro bungalow in the Aireys Inlet riverflat, in the thick shade of two towering old pine trees. Catching the light at his feet is a loamy brocade of russet pine needles, stretching across the yard to the sunroom of his house, one of the few buildings in the town to survive the fires.

In this yard there are vegetables growing, a lemon tree, a boat and outboard motor, chopped firewood, surfboards, fishing buoys, a bicycle, a car. Behind him on the step the door of the bungalow is open. Inside the bungalow there is a single bed and a desk with books and cassettes on it. There is music playing, an old-fashioned melody full of tremulous, wistful mandolins. The sound of the music blends with the ocean waves falling into the rivermouth a couple of hundred metres to the south.

The music stops and a voice begins to speak.

The voice the young man hears from the bungalow cassette player is Italian; the words are Italian too. He listens as they are translated and spoken again in English in the foreground of the music, and over the sound of the sea:

“This house was inhabited by the sea, by the smell of the sea, the light of the sea, the voice of the sea. The sea was omnipresent. [Connolly 1988]
The voice pauses now, so that only the sound of the sea can be heard, which importantly, the young man on the step now realises, is coming both from the recording and from the rivermouth.

A woman’s voice is heard next, once again speaking English but in a strong Neapolitan accent:

At times I have a very beautiful dream and there is always Palazzo Donn’Anna, and the very clear water. It is a part of my life that I wouldn’t change with anybody else. I think it was a privilege to live in such an old, majestic, magic place.

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I suspect Elaine Scarry is correct when she describes ‘imagining’ as ‘an act of perpetual mimesis, whether undertaken in our own daydreams or under the instruction of great writers’ [p. 6]. I believe also that every reader comes to a text with a book already in mind, an inner book, more a poem-space really, which they hope the actual book in their hands will converge with, light up, or provide a fresh variation of. The role of the author therefore is to provide something like what Donna Haraway calls ‘response-ability’ [p. 2, 29]; that is, conditions propitious to that convergence and lighting-up. To some degree this is done by participating intuitively in the sometimes shamanic, sometimes intellectual history of archetypal forms.

When I was in my early twenties and sitting on that bungalow step, a correspondence began to form between the depth of feeling and effect (of consolation and confrontation) that I experienced in the bush and oceanscape around Aireys Inlet (Mangowak), and the emotional and visual response I was beginning to have to certain works of fiction and poetry. Reading poets and novelists from many countries, including Australia, was to be ushered through a series of unique portals to a mental landscape of sensuous insight and numinous
reflection. The experience, because of both its intensity and its liminal quality, converged with my sense of place on the coast. A responsive, cyclical, perpetual interaction was set up that spilt beyond the delineations of conscious thoughts or physical body into the ‘response-ability’ of literary forms.

Looking first at the landscape, then at the page I was reading, then back at the landscape while still sensing the page, then returning to the text with the life-world of landscape still in my nostrils, a desire was seeded for another page, a new page, on which I could write fresh words, lines, sentences, paragraphs, poems, fables, novels.

In defining the term *wreading*, that is, the simultaneous and recursive synthesis of reading and writing, the critic Jed Rasula says: “‘Wreading’ is my neologism for the collaborative momentum initiated by certain texts” [p. 11n]. This definition approximates my youthful experience. I noticed even at the time, while *wreading* the works of historical periods and from distant geographies, that this experience amounted to a magnification process which enlarged certain texts of fiction or poetry by placing them mentally in my own physical landscape. Therein I reanimated the narrative and characters within the optics, acoustics and olfactory parameters of my own ground. While reading literary works from other parts of Australia, but also from pre-Soviet Russia, from Second-Empire France, from Victorian England, from the American Roaring Twenties or from Ancient Greece, I positioned the action of the work, the narrative events and settings, within my own regional topography. Thus, I pictured Count Vronsky from Tolstoy’s *Anna Karenina* [1877] on a shooting expedition in the Allen Noble Bird Sanctuary in Aireys Inlet. I imagined Flaubert’s characters Bouvard and Pecuchet inhabiting a country house not in Normandy, but on Lardner’s Track near Gellibrand, in the heart of the Otway forest. The action of my *wread* version of Charles Dickens’ *Bleak House* [1853] took place on the seam between forest and plain, in the grounds of the Western District property near Birregurra that borrowed its name. The arc of Jay Gatsby’s gaze across the water to the green light on Daisy Buchanan’s East Egg dock lay on the southwesterly diagonal from Split Point across Loutitt Bay to the pier below the Grand Pacific Hotel in Lorne. Polyphemus’ legendary hostages escaped not from a Cyclopean cave on the
shores of Homeric Sicily, but from one of the two caves positioned just underneath the Split Point lighthouse.

With this in mind it was perhaps a logical next step to seek the thrill provided by these non-endemic works of art in imaginative texts intentionally set in my local geography. But what I found when I went looking for such local equivalents was, apart from one or two exceptions, silence…absence. Without giving an exhaustive survey of the few exceptions to that absence, nor of texts I read that were situated at least in part on the outer borderlands of my coastal geography of the Otways area of the Great Ocean Road in southwestern Victoria (such as Peter Carey’s *Illywhacker* [1985] and the fiction of Beverley Farmer and Gerald Murnane), it is sufficient in this auto-ethnographic context to note that the following two texts were the only ones I located at the time.

In the early 1950s the English-born detective writer Arthur Upfield had rented a house in Aireys Inlet in order to write a crime novel there. This novel, *The Clue of the New Shoe* [1952], set in a fictional town called Split Point, featured Upfield’s aboriginal detective, Boney. At the time the novel struck me as being atmospherically accurate, but disappointingly generic in both a cultural and formal sense (I nevertheless reprised Upfield’s fictional character Fred Ayling in my Mangowak novels).

In 1980 Craig Robertson had written a novelised account of the life of escaped convict William Buckley, which dramatised Buckley’s time in Mangowak and his life with the Wadawurrung in the surrounding area. By simply acknowledging alternative versions and possibilities of place by dramatising life prior to official white settlement, this novel was compelling. Its ultimate significance to me, however, lay as much in the inclusion of a word-list of Wadawurrung language at the back as it did in the body of the text. This glossary was my first encounter in a book of the language spoken in Mangowak for thousands of years, and led to me forming the band Barroworn, the name of which came from the spelling used for the Wadawurrung word for ‘magpie’ in Robertson’s list. After two years of extensive touring through remote regions of Victoria and Tasmania, Barroworn’s only recorded album, *Mangowak Days*, was released in 1995.
Unlike other landscapes already famous for their literary histories such as the New England coast of North America, Dantean Tuscany, or the Lakes District of England, and even unlike less delineated, but equally productive literary regions such as the Essex palimpsest documented by British chorographer James Canton in his *Out of Essex: Re-Imagining a Literary Landscape*, there was a distinct and resonating lack of literary forbears in my midst [Canton 2013]. The two books of Upfield and Robertson were all that came to hand, and from subsequent research I have found that in truth there was not much more to discover. It is also worth noting that these two books were far from well-known amongst the coastal community.

Thus there was an eerie lack of correspondence between a landscape which seemed so aesthetically generative and the silence of written responses to it. The gap between the ground I lived on and its imaginative written representations seemed significant. I began to reflect on the source landscapes of the books I’d been reading, the wread nature of my own landscape as I experienced it, and what had not been described. I became aware that my cultural landscape appeared not like the succulent creative and regenerative ground I was walking on, but like a dried-up riverbed bearing little resemblance to it.

*The riverbed, dried-up, half-full of leaves.*

*Us, listening to a river in the trees.*

[Seamus Heaney – epigraph to *The Haw Lantern*]

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The inheritance of a landscape almost entirely divested of its native peoples can too easily become inflected with the linear concept, also inherited, of the prior existence of a mythical lost idyll. This lost idyll, with its implication of humanity’s Fall from grace into sin, is of course a key concept of Christianity, but as James Boyce outlines in his study, *Born Bad: Original Sin and the making of*
the Western World, it has likewise been buttressed by Western philosophical culture from St Augustine to Richard Dawkins [Boyce 2014]. In a literary context this tendency was reinforced by the sense of a lost bibliographic arcadia of wisdom and aesthetic grace, a by-product of the rediscovery of classical manuscripts by Renaissance scholars such as Poggio Bracciolini in the 15th century [Greenblatt 2011, p. 24]. Simply put, such literary golden ageism helped in turn to germinate the subsequent literary work of Romantic era poets like Lord Byron, Percy Bysshe Shelley and William Wordsworth, who were preoccupied not only with notions of the Fall, but with recolonising Edenic realms for heroic purposes, and with pastoral literary forms. As historian and museum ethnographer Phillip Jones has shown in his essay ‘Beyond Songlines’ [Jones 2017], this strain of Edenic nostalgia has also been reinforced in more recent years by European reductions of the ‘history-collapsing’ aboriginal metaphysics of the Dreaming, or Dreamtime. I should also note that the concept of a lost idyll, or a ‘lost harmony,’ can be associated with the idea explored in Chapter One of the amniotic grotto of the psychoacoustic womb, just as it can also be viewed as a companion-idea to Laxness’ ‘one true note’, which I explored in Chapter Two.

The Neapolitan novelist and thinker Raffaele La Capria characterises the lost harmony in his own way, with the conceptual phrase La Bella Giornata, or ‘The Beautiful Day’ [Connolly 1988]. La Bella Giornata bears a resemblance to the ‘Dreaming’ in so far as it refers to an inner, or metaphysical, sight that originates in the deep past but remains eternally present, and is therefore continually shaping the future. At the same time as discovering the work of La Capria through listening to an ABC radio documentary on my bungalow step that day back in my twenties, I had also been reading non-fiction texts dealing with the dispossession and genocide that had taken place in Australia. One of these books, A Distant Field of Murder (1990) by Jan Critchett, dealt with the historical situation in the Western District of Victoria by charting the violent disruption of white settlement in Gunditjmara, Gadabanud, Gulidjan, Wadawurrung and other homelands. Though far from identical, both La Capria’s mythological La Bella Giornata and the daily lived realities of traditional Indigenous family and cultural life in Wadawurrung tabayl alluded to by Critchett denoted a continuity of culture that was slipping from focus, that was attenuated, marred, even ruined by modern
industrial society. Increasingly now I was feeling the reality of what it was like to stand on a map amongst lost coordinates. Bad cultural weather had arrived – my family had arrived with it – and the sound of the ocean filling the area of this map began to sound to me like a tear in a fabric I was not even privy to understand.

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The concept of singing the land is believed by some theorists to be a key footing in the origination of language itself. As anthropologist and linguist Edward Sapir makes clear:

The mere existence of a certain type of animal in the physical environment of a people does not suffice to give rise to a linguistic symbol referring to it. It is necessary that the animal be known by the members of the group in common and that they have some interest, however slight, in it before the language of the group is called upon to make reference to this particular element of the physical environment. [p. 14]

I realised that in the history of the landscape I had inherited there had been a dramatic loss of local landscape elements that were ‘known by the members of the group in common’. Another way of putting this would be to say that with the coming of Europeans to Wadawurrung tabayl there had been a falling-away between verses of the land as it is sung. I stood at the heart of a vertiginous caesura. During my time in the Mediterranean I had learnt that on the mythologically drenched island of Crete the word for *throat* is the same as the word for *gorge*: so was the ancient steep-sided riverflat of Aireys Inlet then a throat whose tongue had been ripped out by colonisation?

Each summer morning my father would rise in the riverflat to go fishing but before leaving the house he would invariably ask in an enthusiastic tone: *did you hear the ocean last night?* My presumption at this time was that to him this sound denoted happiness, even freedom. Not yet knowing about my grandfather’s trip to
Lorne in 1937, I was only half right. For me, however, the sound of the ocean at this point did not contain the grief of my grandfather, nor was it fully described by the enthusiasm of my father’s question. On the contrary, it seemed as atavistic as the moon. It did, however, form a question mark in my mind. Or multiple question marks. With every crash and breath of wave on the shore at night and with every recollection of that sound in the light of day, another, equally perpetual, quandary came. What next? What now? How to write, to sing, to say?

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Magnetised by a sense of all that had been lost, by the feeling of a vacuum (nature abhors a vacuum, in this case a vacuum of story and song), by *La Bella Giornata* and the broken song of the Wadawurrung, I became drawn to the pursuance of the impossible ‘one true note’ through immersing myself in what I considered at the time to be the only ethical resources at my disposal. Whatever sympathies or affinities I felt I had with the anglo-indigenous landscape of what had once purely been Wadawurrung tabayl, I would not, I could not, speak, or sing, for the people who had been dispossessed. Although I began at that time to learn some Wadawurrung words (prompted by the word list in the back of Robertson’s *Buckley’s Hope*), a simultaneous aspect of my realisation of the violent past of my country was that I was unmistakably, even as late as the 1980s, a European agent amongst it. From his reconstruction of 27 Wadawurrung clans, Ian D. Clark estimates that at the time of first contact in 1835 the population of the Wadawurrung was somewhere between 1620 and 3240 members [Clark 1990, p. 307]. A statewide census taken 42 years later, on the 15th of March 1877, returned a total Wadawurrung population of 10 people [Clark 1990, p. 309]. What exactly my ancestors’ role had been in this decline, if any, is unclear. But I do know that James and Mary Day, who arrived in Geelong in 1841 as farm servants from County Offaly in Ireland, eventually owned their own farm, the pastures of which fronted the Barwon River at Inverleigh. I also know that Barwon is a colonial mispronunciation of *parrwang*, the Wadawurrung word for magpie. These days the road taken to get to the site of James and Mary’s old farm is called Days
Road. Though James and Mary did not take up that riverland until the population of the Wadawurrung had already been significantly reduced, the fact remains that the lack of access to the traditional food sources of the waterways of Wadawurrung tabayl was one of the key factors in the demise of its people. Even by the time James and Mary were buried in the cemetery in Inverleigh in the late 1800s, the horror was still fresh. The mythological waters of the Magpie River still flowed right past their door.

In short, my creative impulses certainly afforded me no exemption. I would not be telling anyone else’s story. That had been done too often in the colonial era. As Indigenous Australian novelist Alexis Wright says in her essay ‘What Happens When You Tell Somebody Else’s Story?’:

> When it comes to how our stories are being told, supposedly on our behalf, or for our interest or supposed good, it has never been a level playing field. We do not get much of a chance to say what is right or wrong about the stories told on our behalf—which stories are told or how they are told. It just happens, and we try to deal with the fallout. [Wright 2016]

Nevertheless for me the quandary remained, because my impulse towards language, towards song, the impulse to respond mythopoetically to my local geography, was stronger than ever. As Ashcroft, Devlin-Glass and McCredden say of poet Judith Wright in their study of the sacred in Australian literature, I had both ‘a deeply etched knowledge of being from a conquering people’ and a desire for a ‘fertile invoking of place’ [2012, p. 162].

So, how, what, to write, to sing, to say?

By the time I was in my twenties an initial response had begun to form. I made the decision to start educating myself in the voices, music, literature, history and mythology of my two genetic bloodlines, Irish and Sicilian. The Irish strain was predominantly that but could also include the wider Celtic world. The Sicilian would include the entire tentacular Mediterranean. As a response to the violence that had been perpetrated upon the Wadawurrung in their own homelands, I
realised, for better or worse, that only within my own literal blood-zones of
cultural inheritance did I feel comfortable to speak or sing. As a consequence of
the genocide that had occurred on the ground where I walked, a proposed
cartography of which is included in Clark’s *Scars in The Landscape* [1995], all
other paths seemed transgressive, even filled with shame. Only in Irish and
Mediterranean examples could I seek a correspondence with the numinosity I was
experiencing; only in those traditions could I learn, or even borrow, a method, a
tone, a cadence, the *techniques of a voice* that, when inevitably inflected by my
own experience of the colonial geography, could approximate my *wreadings of*
book, ocean and land. Essentially this was a private quest for creative freedom
rather than redemptive truth. I did not intend to bear witness to a tragedy that was
not my own but at the same time I was on an ineluctable search for authenticity in
every line. The impossible ‘one true note’.

I embarked on two simultaneous projects, the writing of my first novel *The
Patron Saint of Eels* (2005), which narrates the metaphysical migration of an
eighteenth century southern Italian Franciscan monk into the anglo-indigenous
landscape of 21st-century Mangowak, and the setting of poems by the Irish poet
WB Yeats to music on a pump organ, or harmonium, a project which resulted in
my album *The Black Tower: Songs from the Poetry of WB Yeats*, subsequently
praised by the Yeats Society of Ireland as ‘equal to, if not surpassing the finest
musical interpretations of Yeats ever made’.

During these intensely hybridistic compositional days I would look down at the
skin of my arm and remind myself that despite the fact that I was born here in
Australia, like so many of the poems I had been reading, thinking about, and
singing, that skin, in evolutionary terms, had largely been made elsewhere. It was
Atlantic skin, Mediterranean skin, northern hemispheric skin. Over 120 years
before I was born, James and Mary Day were living only 18 miles from Aireys
Inlet, but what did that matter? I had their genes, their Irish freckles on my
shoulders. Likewise, my great-great-grandfather Antonio Denerio from Riposto in
Sicily walked Wadawurrung tabayl in those same 1840s. Because of my
physiognomy and colouring, I had been taken to be Italian all my life, but what
did that say? What, after all, is one hundred years in an ‘*old, majestic, magic*
place’ [Connolly 1988] like this? Is it a long time, a short time, a long enough
time to shed a skin, to lose sight of where you came from? How can the epigenetic
influence in such a case be measured?

‘Language is a skin.’ [Barthes 2002, A Lover’s Discourse, p. 74]

By hunting amongst the creative quarry of Ireland and Italy, despite their
geographic remove as landscapes, I hoped to discover the source materials of a
relevant prelude, some pre-existing mythological and lyrical strata that could help
me answer my own impulse to respond to the grandeur, sorrow and mystery of the
world. To sing the land.

I hoped to discover something that had been left behind as well as taken away…

2.

The Patron Saint of Eels was the first of three Mangowak novels, throughout the
writing of which (and also during the writing of Archipelago of Souls) I worked at
Lorne Fisheries at the pier head on Point Grey in Lorne in southwest Victoria.
This fishery started as a fishermen’s co-operative in the 1960s, when barracouta
(thyrsites atun) were being caught in quantities as large as 1000 to 2500 tonnes a
year [Barker 2017, p. 9]. At its peak there were 24 ‘cota’ boats on the Lorne pier,
but when the stocks of thyrsites atun began to dwindle due to a strengthening of
the warm East Australian Current, the Lorne model then transferred from a co-
operative arrangement to a private business owned by local partners and run by a
young Greek-Macedonian migrant, Christos Raskatos, and his family.

Despite this change of modus operandi the cultural seeds of the co-operative
fishery remained extant. To the local fishermen who now brought their Southern
Rock Lobster and sharks up onto the patinated landing to be weighed and
processed, the ocean had become over time not only a worksite and source of
income but also a repository of story, mystery, mishap, humour and myth. It also
became clear under the new arrangement that for Christos Raskatos, who had come to work in Lorne in the days of the co-op, and who was now the chief proprietor and driving force behind Lorne Fisheries, the ocean was an imaginative field with the potential to link and light up the two key realities of his life: his prior existence as a working-class child of Greek migrants in Geelong, and the metaphysical call of his family’s cultural lineage back in the Mediterranean.

On two blackboards fixed to the front wall of the co-op building beside the pier on Point Grey, ostensibly there to announce the range and price of the daily catch, Christos Raskatos began to publish poetry. He continued doing so through four decades until the closure of Lorne Fisheries in 2016.

During these years the local residents, holiday-makers and visiting tourists to whom Christos Raskatos sold seafood found themselves enmeshed in a universal story dissolving time and space. They were not only contemporary participants in a postcolonial fishery and tourism economy, but players in a continuous human drama for which the ocean of Bass Strait, and specifically Louttit Bay, provided a compelling and renewing analogue. Raskatos’ co-op poems, which were written predominantly in English but occasionally in Greek, made reference to local events and people. They cast the deeds and postures of these people and events, however, in the context of the metaphysical paradigm of the myths of Ancient Greece. Over time, as the poems on the co-op blackboards began to function as a chronicle of the vicissitudes of the poet’s own life and the life of the town, they began also to serve as a Homeric celebration of human continuities. In doing so the co-op poems served to re-equip Lorne with something that had largely been absent from the site since the expropriation of Gadabanud and Wadawurrung lands in the nineteenth century: a metaphysics of place.

Despite Philip Jones’ explication in ‘Beyond Songlines’ of the acknowledged difficulties of precisely defining the concept of ‘The Dreaming’ or ‘Dreamtime’ in written English, the anthropologist W.E.H. Stanner in his 1953 essay ‘The Dreaming’ defined what he called ‘the metaphysical gift’ of traditional Aboriginal society as ‘the ability to transcend oneself, to make acts of imagination so that one can stand “outside” or “away from” oneself, and turn the universe, oneself and
one’s fellows into objects of contemplation’ [p. 63]. This definition shares at least some common ground with the perspective of Cheshire novelist and chorographer Alan Garner when he says: ‘creativity is not an occupation. It is service to something beyond the self. In this broad sense, it partakes of the religious’ [Garner 2015, p. 76].

As is evident in the topographical nomenclature of this coast where I write, where towns such as Anglesea, Torquay and Lorne were named after pre-existing British places or people in the manner of colonial selfies, since first white settlement ‘locals’ had looked to the ways in which the place reminded them of already extant cultural sites in the United Kingdom. Likewise, they had imported the Christian beliefs of Europe and built churches in order to permanently overlay these beliefs upon the place. While it is perhaps perfectly understandable that a European settler society should initially hearken back to their source culture in order to structure their new social arrangements, there is nevertheless an inherent disjuncture that takes place when the stories used by that society to explain the mysteries of human and animal life and the structure of the cosmos become, as it were, generic. A cultural distance is installed between the physical features of life and death as they are experienced in the sensual realm of the place itself and the way in which they are interpreted metaphysically.

To some extent, Christos Raskatos’ co-op poems went part of the way towards lessening that distance. Through his combining of the demotic, local, and often iconoclastic vernacular with a demonstrative use of a Homeric mythological inheritance, the poet was able to ‘make acts of imagination,’ in Stanner’s words, that turned ‘the universe, oneself and one’s fellows into objects of contemplation’. The co-op poems did this by imaginatively redefining the Lorne community as existing within what Stanner might call the ‘everywhen’ [p. 58]. Stanner’s 1953 neologism resembles La Capria’s Neapolitan La Bella Giornata in the way it folds the past, and geographically distant locations, into the historical and topographic present. Thus in Christos Raskatos’ world the application of originally place-specific Greek myths such as Mount Olympus, the Cretan labyrinth at Knossos, or the Taenarum (the Peloponnese entrance to Hades, located at Cape Taenarum), became viable. An Otway Taenarum became a
mythographic reality. Indeed, his poems often referenced Hades, a mythological region which, as Julie Baleriaux has shown in her study of how meaning was given to subterranean rivers in ancient Mediterranean landscapes, ‘may have been inspired by the widespread karstic landscapes in Greece’ and, in particular, the Peloponnese around Cape Taenarum [2016, p. 110]. It is interesting to note how the Otway basin too is predominantly a karst landscape, a characteristic feature of which, according to the Karst Waters Institute, is a porousness resulting from the dissolution of soluble rocks such as limestone, creating networks of underground streams, caves and sinkholes. Such features were described – a ‘group of orifices’, ‘extraordinary caverns’ – by the Superintendent of the Port Phillip District and future Governor of Victoria, Charles Latrobe, in 1846, when his party rode through the forest to investigate the building of a lighthouse on Cape Otway to alleviate the incidence of shipwrecks in Bass Strait [Blake 1975, p. 19]. In karst landscapes the same stream can run for miles on the surface before diving under the land and reappearing somewhere else. Baleriaux believes this feature of topographic porousness seeded Greek notions of the parallel unseen underworld of Hades. In Christos Raskatos’ hands, this allegorical ‘unseen’ became once again a spoken everyday force in Lorne.

As such the community was at least in part redefined, not by ethnicity or religion but by the way each moment of daily experience is given meaning by the journey through time and space that has preceded it. Thus, in Raskatos’ poems the European postcolonial community was endowed with a human continuity stretching at least back to the heroic age of Homer’s day. The community members of Lorne were presented back to themselves not merely as citizens of Australia but as agents in a metaphysical drama, whereby they were assigned their roles as ironic amphibians – half shore-dwellers, half in the waves – and preternaturalists – identities capable of dwelling in and thinking about a liminal space between spirit and body, between life and whatever precedes, succeeds, or surrounds it. Ultimately the co-op poems claimed the common daily survival of life’s high and low weathers, of all that the unpredictable ocean of existence can dish up, as a significant, even heroic, achievement in itself. The most ‘ordinary’ and uncelebrated Lorne people could therefore be represented as everyday locals
with intrinsic relations not only to sea and land, but to other worlds of miracle, wonder and metaphysical power.

One function of the Lorne co-op poems then was to reinvest a sense of the sacred in a place that had been desacralised by invasion and colonised by the generic tropes of the British empire and its dominions. Another function was to decolonise the idea of heroism by wresting back the metaphysical realm from the humourless strictures of church and state. The working poet was quite literally taking the gods outside again, up into the beech and mountain ash forests of the Otways overlooking Bass Strait and the Southern Ocean, back into the realm of the hunts and humours of everyday life. On chalkboards streaked with saltspray, seaweed, pollen and wind, Raskatos reinserted a strata of pre-Christian mythology back into the ancient east-facing cove of Lorne. In flamboyant style he repersonified the place, attributing to the physical environment the qualities and power of a Homeric goddess, or a dear but formidable old friend, therefore restoring the site as a place of worship in itself. In the co-op poems the topography of the littoral and the sea-light were once again the objects of transformational power and devotion, not the cloistered iconography inside the colonial church. On the salt-streaked co-op blackboards he cunningly improvised a voice that summoned pre-Christian deities in an attempt to match his surroundings, to reacknowledge and narrate not only the epic drama of the coastline, but the wonders of what we can’t see and can never know, as well as the often unnoticed mysteries of everyday deeply felt emotion.

Unlike the novels I wrote while working alongside him in the fishery, Raskatos’ co-op poems were never published in a book but only in the ephemeral and performative chalk of the striated, streaked and mottled workaday space that was the fishery on Point Grey. In their impermanence the co-op poems bore similarities to the nightly live music played through summer by bands such as AC/DC and Cold Chisel in the Grand Pacific Hotel, which hovered in late Victorian grandeur above the pier and fishery, and where once the arias of Beniamino Gigli had been played on a gramophone in the foyer. The co-op poems sat in fact in an interstice between the oral and written traditions, not only insofar as the weather co-opted them by determining their legibility, but due to the fact
that the poet was often on hand to perform the written poem for the reader. These factors helped define the co-op poems as work by a poet living in between realms, one of which was halfway between manual labour and imaginative composition, another between the written and the spoken text, and yet another between the seen and unseen. As written on the blackboards the poems could be read only for as long as the weather allowed, and by that fact alone they were symbiotic with the place. They were not separated from the environment they emerged from and thus one had to physically be in the place to encounter them. And if while reading them the reader got wet, whether from sea spray or rain, the texts themselves got wet as well.

3.

As is evident in his William Buckley novel Strandloper (discussed in Chapter 2) Alan Garner believes that ‘what we call “creativity” is the bringing together of pre-existing entities that have not been seen to connect before’ [Garner 2015, p. 74]. Here then, excluding the Australian texts I was also reading at the time of composing the four novels which are the subject of this exegesis, is a list of components for my own psychogeographic creative instrument, a list of some key inflectors, or companion species, from the literary traditions of my two migratory bloodlines:


Besieged by the seeming infinitude of contemporary analogies for the concepts of ‘network’ and ‘community’, I am tempted to describe this as a list not only of companion species, but as a textual neighbourhood, an epigenetic milieu, a
mycelial library. My preferred way of looking at the ingredients of this list however is as the stops of a pump organ or harmonium, like the one my recurring character Ron McCoy plays in the second Mangowak novel, *Ron McCoy’s Sea of Diamonds* [2007]. The list then can be seen as a set of readymade stops which I arranged in various combinations in order to respond to:

- what my grandfather heard under his pillow in the Grand Pacific Hotel at Lorne;
- what my father heard when he stepped out of the red Ford van in the carpark of the Inlet Hotel; and
- what I heard when as a younger man I cupped my ear on the sound of the ocean amongst the cultural absence in the landscape around me.

For instance, to extemporize: with the W.B. Yeats stop pulled, the harmonium is capable of intoning radical innocence, an innocence attained through maturation, through hard labour at the craft of writing, through a fascination with ancestral customs and beliefs. With the Lady Augusta Gregory stop activated, there is a relevant personal redemption at hand, in creative and ethnographic form, given that it was her husband, Robert Gregory, who was responsible for the land laws that contributed so specifically to the cultural devastation of the Irish potato famine [Toibin 2003]. With the John McGahern stop open, the harmonium sounds reed-clear and unsentimental, and yet somehow full of love. It plays with an unwavering fidelity to regionality, with an emphasis on dark irony in the received opinions of the landscape. The Seamus Heaney stop, with its assiduous linguistic retrievals and ability to synthesise them with modern existence, re-inherits pastoral yet percussive sounds, which create tactile, luminous sensations of the timeless-everyday. By opening the Italianate stop of Giuseppe Di Lampedusa we become aware, in the story of the late demise of the Salina family in his novel *Il Gattopardo, or The Leopard* [1963] of a landscape tragically imbued with the past, a demesne of fallen grandeur. Adding Leonardo Sciascia’s more contemporary Sicilian stop to this, we incorporate the unflinching cultural logic of Mafia brutality and fear. The harmonium begins to filter the events of small communities through a deeply moral lens. With the Marisa Fazio and Anna Maria Ortese stops open, we find the picaresque and Commedia Dell’Arte traditions
reticulated through the natural thrill of magic realism, reintegrating materialism with fabulistic leaps of the mythic imagination. Through the Giuseppe Verga stop, we sound the keys to provide working trials of the human figure in the heat-drugged landscape, and by opening the Norman Douglas stop we receive the volume and tone of a lyrically represented colonised shore dedicated to a curation of old behaviours, arts and cuisines.

This harmonium is an imaginative foundry in which writer-forbears are filtered, inevitably, through a mysteriously alchemical and largely intuitive auditing process. They are tried in different combinations, alone, in couples and trios, and sometimes in diaposonic unison. Through the framework of the harmonium I seek, ineluctably as Halldor Laxness has shown, both the fundamental note and the harmonics it issues, the voices of correspondence, in order to describe the sound of the sea and the people living within its range, and to augment it for readers and listeners. The search for psychoacoustic accuracy, for the right sound or arrangement of sounds, for the right word or combination of words, the right character or combination of characters to animate upon a string of narrative, is both a truffling and a composting process, a trial and error on the wallaby process of Scarry’s mimetic imagination, as well as an exercise in auto-ethnographic tuning. I cock an ear, I comb an archive, I sniff the ground, I proffer a chord. In attempting to document honestly the unsequestered everyday process of making that has resulted in the publication of my novels, I am seeking to deal in what Nicholas Jose has called ‘the personal imperatives of history’ [Jose 2002, p. 260]. In doing so I am seeking to show how my process, though not quite ‘readymade’ in the Dada sense of the term, could perhaps be described, in its everyday practical distance from academies and urban centres of culture, as DIY, and how it has by necessity eluded Jose’s description of the ‘uncharmed circle of identity and counter-identity’ [p. 260]. Or, as environmental philosopher Freya Mathews puts it in her book The Ecological Self, I seek, both in the conduct of the process of composition and in the final compositions themselves, to recognise ‘inalienable interconnectedness and oneness with the whole of life’ [p. 136]. In this way I am attempting to render a way of being that is somehow local and universal, eavesdropped, interpolated, wread, deeply felt, transtemporal, reconstituted. It is a
multi-timbed way of making that is compatible with a postcolonial collage-land of disrupted cultural memory.

By this method beauty without transgression is disqualified. Tragedy without humour likewise. Possession without dispossession has no purchase here. The imported, constantly mutating English language itself is intrinsically vernacularised, hybridised, rendered both demotic and high, tending towards sonic and sociological accuracy but remaining eternally tangential.

In theoretical terms the cultural context for this approach reminds me of Paul Carter’s interpretation of the way modernism, despite its own tendency to ‘fetishize the ground as territory,’ nevertheless ‘kept open the possibility of a poetics responsive to the brute facts of colonialism’ [Carter 1996, p. 97]. Inevitably then I found myself beginning to pedal a dialectical instrument, an anglo-indigenous instrument, a breathing, literary, pollen-filled harmonium, exuding floral wafts as well as funereal tones, producing synaesthetic texts born from the heaths and shores of the postcolonial landscape with its sensory, as well as cultural, diversity of stops.

4.

Just as there is no stone without stipple, no lichen without basis, no ironstone headland without telluric rift and heat, I felt little stereotypic anxiety of influence as my Mangowak novels got underway, despite my resorting to traditional, literary, Irish and Mediterranean models. No doubt this unabashedness came partly from my own naiveté, but it also came from working alongside Christos Raskatos and the knowledge, implied by his own embrace of poetic ‘groundedness’ and ‘groundlessness’ [Carter 1996, p. 97], that by its very nature the littoral garden of words can never be devoid of flotsam and jetsam, things that have washed up, wild sonic frequencies, so-called invasive species, contravening rasp or song. Likewise, the arrangement of mimetic organ-stops that we call the written sentence, proceeding as it does in a literary lineage, needs always to be
stabilised by the geology of silence. There is a sonic prose of a shore that teems with the presence and absence of past voices, as well as the serial mathematics of stem, petal, stamen, sun and moon. Every tide, like every day, is the same but somehow different.

Did you hear the ocean last night?

†

That veering of the red Ford van into the macrocarpa shade of the Inlet Hotel in 1947 was reenacted time and time again throughout my childhood. Before my family were able to move permanently to Aireys Inlet, we would make the long drive from Melbourne to Aireys Inlet in the Holden station wagon, but we would never arrive at our house without veering into the hotel carpark first. My mother, my sister, my three brothers and I, would wait patiently (or impatiently!) while my father relived his foundation Aireys Inlet ritual. The ritual had an added dimension now as well, for Norma Bardin, grand-daughter of the lightkeeper George Bardin, was now Norma Calvert, wife of the Inlet Hotel publican, Stuart Calvert.

After a half hour, or maybe an hour, or even two, Dad would emerge from the bar, all hale and well met, his collar loosened, his stressful business life miraculously shucked off. Only then would we proceed down to the riverflat and the house, where the days would unfold in the sometimes itchy, sometimes svelte splendour of surf, river and bush. Nights would be spent in Norma and Stuart’s pub, in the front bar of which I learnt, like Noel Lea, the main character of my three Mangowak novels, to pour a passable draught beer at eight years of age.

†
Now, on the bungalow step, the young man hears the refined Anglo-Australian voice beginning to speak, over the sound of recorded fishermen’s songs, and the recorded sea in the background:

_Naples is nearly 3000 years old and for most, if not all of that time, fishermen have worked here at their nets and their boats. At least until just a few years ago._

The melodies of the fishermen go on, but for periods the voice that accompanies them stops speaking.

†

When the ‘Ash Wednesday’ bushfires hit the Otway coast on February 16, 1983, international opera diva Joan Hammond, who had retired to Aireys Inlet a few years previously on medical advice, made a last-minute escape from the coast in her Rolls Royce. After briefly returning the following day to inspect her devastated property she never returned to the district again.

The diva’s traumatic exile is an inversion of the demographic shift which occurred in the area in the decades after Ash Wednesday, the key era of my Mangowak novels. The bushfires of ’83 seemed to crack the economic potential of the area open like the seedpod of the local xanthorrhoea, or grass tree, that relies on such fire to flower [Gott & Conran 1991, p. 64].

The government offered special terms for housing loans in order to assist the rebuild. A small housing boom began, which has continued steadily ever since. Tradesmen of all descriptions, many of them quite young and drawn to the surf, moved to the coast to work on the reconstruction. A lot of them never left. Crucially, just prior to the fires and the reconstruction, the town of Aireys Inlet shifted from rainwater tanks to mains water supplied from a community-owned reservoir in the Painkalac Creek. Thus, the era of long-drop ‘bush dunnies’
changed in the reconstruction to septic and finally sewerage toilets. The perfect storm of this local amenities revolution was complete. What had been a small permanent community with tourism capped by limited infrastructure became a much larger population of tradespeople, accommodation providers, holidaymakers, excursionists, seachangers, and retirees. The shire was henceforth expanded. It changed its name from Barrabool – the Wadawurrung word for ‘oyster’ – to the nominative compound ‘Surfcoast’. The word ‘Surfcoast’ had not been present in the everyday lexicon of locals until it was invented by the newly expanded shire. While on the surface this name change can be viewed as the taking up of the opportunity to brand the place as a destination for visitors, it was also seen by some local residents as the equivalent of a bureaucratic or even thalassocratic shift from music to muzak. It is important however to note that, given the changed infrastructural conditions of the post-1983 shire, it was actually our cultural relationship to two ancient elements, fire and water, that had changed everything. Not the shire. The shire’s language change came later.

So, in the distance, on the other side of the world to Riposto and Palermo and Naples, to Coole Park and Ben Bulben, beyond the wistful mandolins and the low tones of the bungalow radio, where Raffaele La Capria read excerpts in Italian from his novel *L’Armonia Perduta*, or *Lost Harmony*, came now the sound of power-saws, concrete mixers and nail guns. By 1988 the rebuilding of the fire-ravaged town had begun to morph into the development of the town. Gone was the nightman’s round of emptying the outdoor toilets, gone were the daggy low-maintenance beach houses hiding like shy marsupials amongst the ironbarks (*ngangahook*) and teatree (*boono*). Instead, gangly architectural insects of timber, tin and glass began to appear above the epicormic treeline. Two and three-story houses with indoor toilets, large underground septic tanks and open-plan kitchen and living areas, guaranteeing ocean views. And in these spaces another new breed of locals began to seed.

Gone too was the legendary Inlet Hotel. The macrocarpas in its carpark, that had once provided shade for a bright red Ford courier van with insouciant slogans written on its sides, would soon be cut down by a new publican worried that cars passing along the Great Ocean Road might overlook the new hotel. Six months
after he cut the trees down, this publican himself had moved on. But the non-endemic macrocarpas which had softened the hot summer sun were gone, like Wadawurrung tabayl, perhaps forever.

The sense of what had gone before, a new sedimentary layer, had taken on another layer of potency. As the forest sprung its new shoots, the Ash Wednesday fires became a marker of human time, a new year zero on the calendar of memory and possession, and also a haunted borderline of high red flame separating those who were intimate with an old world that had come and gone, and those who were not.

†

In the shade on the bungalow step the young man smokes a cigarette. He listens to the protean melody of the sea, both on tape and in the air. Only this song of more-than-human energy, the tear in the fabric, bears any resemblance to the enigma he feels at the centre of his world. The groundedness and groundlessness. The loss of his father’s mother. The 133 ways of looking at a heartland.

The sound of the ocean contains it all.

He sits on the step underneath the pines, one non-endemic species below another. There is a richness and a loss, laughter and a keening. Very old beginnings of a possible new way of being here.
Conclusion

Every Monday morning I conduct a whole-school assembly on Wadawurrung language at Aireys Inlet Primary School. Each week the students learn new Wadawurrung words, and new ways of looking at the cultural history of their home landscape. On the first Monday of every month, and on other special occasions, they also sing *The Mangowak Song*, an unpublished piece written with some of the words they have learnt, the lyrics a mixture of English and Wadawurrung.

*I’m from Mangowak where the murnong grows*
*Where the garra blooms along the wintry roads*
*I’ve got a smart tonton like the old ngoorang*
*Where the boonea swim that’s where I am*

* murnong – yam daisy
garra – wattle
tonton – brain
ngoorang – bull ant
boonea – eel

The fact that as a non-Indigenous, fifth-generation Australian I am sharing Wadawurrung language with non-Indigenous students of what is these days an affluent coastal town with no known Aboriginal inhabitants is not lost on me. How *could* it be, after what I have written in the previous chapters of this exegesis, where I have tried to explain both the personally intimate and wider cultural background to the creative choices I have made as a writer, and indeed as a chorographer, of the place where I live. The absence I wrote of in all three chapters still exists – I feel it every time I stand up in front of the children – but it is by now an absence I have spent many years attempting to come to terms with. Nowadays I see it as not only a necessity but an honour to speak into that absence,
and of that absence, with the approval of local elders, to the future adults of my area.

Most weeks I include some kind of object in the assembly – it could be an ironbark frond (ngangahook) from the grove next to the school, which was ceremonially opened as the Mangowak Sanctuary by Tandop David Tournier in December 2016. It could be a piece of local ochre (nyooroo) from the nearby ocean cliffs, a mobile phone (yarna larka), the picture of Narrandjerri elder David Unaipon on the Australian $50 note, or an eel caught in the Painkalac Creek as it slithers through town on its way to meeting the sea under the Split Point lighthouse. One Monday in the autumn of 2017, in the middle of mushroom season here in Mangowak, I took in a crab brittlegill mushroom. The crab brittlegill is one of some 750 varieties of mushroom gathered under the genus name *Russula*. Our local variety – *Russula xerampelina* – grows on the banks of the Painkalac just a few metres from my front door. As I held up the mushroom in front of the school I explained to the kids how the crab brittlegills love pine trees, particularly non-indigenous pines like *pinus radiata* and *pinus macrocarpa*. They grow in the earth we live upon, in the soil we call home, but only in the right symbiotic mix of nutrients and sunlight created in grassy clearings near these introduced trees. Being what the mycologists call ‘ectomycorrhizal symbionts’, [Hafidi & Duponnois 2012, p. 17] the great likelihood is that *Russula xerampelina* would not grow at all in our area without the existence of the introduced pines. The interesting point though is that the crab brittlegills themselves, unlike the pines, were never intentionally introduced into Australia by colonisation. It is not a case of a spore being introduced by a colonial mycologist, or a seed being planted by a land-grabbing grazier. Rather, the crab brittlegills have spontaneously and symbiotically generated within the mycelial profile of the new anglo-indigenous soil conditions.

I tell the kids that when I walk around the place and see a crab brittlegill growing, I get excited. This is for two reasons. The first reason is that the crab brittlegills are delicious, and I know that myself and my family will be eating well that night. The second reason is that the crab brittlegill has come to symbolise for me the way that we could all potentially grow here together, in this soil, without having
to seem out of place, or too dominant, and without spreading like invasive weeds or an invading power destroying its very host.

If I was talking to an audience of academic adults rather than a group of primary school-aged children, I might at this point cite Donna Haraway’s symchthonic ideas of ‘conjugal kin’, ‘ongoingness’, and her theory that our survival depends increasingly on our ability to work together as ‘companion species’ [2016, p. 11, 110]. Or I might cite Thomas Berry’s coining of the term ‘Ecozoic era’, to name a future in which humans will overcome their current fate as an isolated species and willingly re-enter the teeming symbiosis of earthly life-forms [Kiplinger 2010]. With the children however, I simply point out how, despite the fact that I have been noticing the crab brittlegills all my life, it wasn’t until I was an adult that I began to actually eat them, never having been told by my parents, and them not having been told by theirs, nor theirs by theirs, nor by anyone else, that they were edible, non-invasive, and delicious. As with so much in my home landscape, my ignorance of the delights of the crab brittlegill is therefore multi-generational; and yet, it was my own 13-year-old son who, through his own interest and research, informed me that it could be eaten and enjoyed. The beaded glasswort (*Salicornia quinqueflora*) is a similar but even more telling case, I tell the kids. This salty native succulent grows in great abundance all over the Painkalac riverflat here in Mangowak. In Korea it has long been viewed as a highly restorative and nutritious superfood, akin to their beloved ginseng, but here in Aireys Inlet, despite my family and friends’ longstanding appetite for hunting and foraging, no-one ever told me what a delicious and precious food it was. This was because, due directly to the dispossession of the Wadawurrung in our area, no-one knew. ‘The greatest song of the land is the food it produces’, I tell the kids, quoting that most anglo-indigenous of Australian writers, Eric Rolls [Malouf 2014, p. 173]. You are what you eat, I say to them, so don’t miss out on the connection. Try to understand your place, listen to what it’s telling you so you can be here properly and look after things well.
As with the novels that form its subject, this exegesis amounts to a new iteration of my attempt to understand how best to express, or *match*, with written language, the place where I live. As always this has involved what Ruth Blair, in her essay on the bioregional novel, calls ‘a constant process of relationship and negotiation amongst phenomena’ [2012, p. 165]. Indeed, in his *My Multicultural Life* David Malouf writes that ‘Australia began as a myth, an idea in the mind of Europe’ [2012, p. 17] and my process as a writer of fiction in the late 20th and early 21st century, and as the writer of this exegesis, clearly reflects that origin. The process of how I have come to *be here* as a writer is the real narrative of the exegesis, which in turn is a key part of the ongoing challenge of how to *be here* as a human being. As Ruth Behar wisely concludes in her work on the interplay between textuality and orality: ‘The experience is always larger than anything you can write about’ [Schnur Neile & Behar p. 149].

I have no doubt that the urgency of this ongoing challenge of *being here* is tied up with the alarming meteorological, and therefore psychogeographical, conditions of our industrial and post-industrial epoch where, as Bruno Latour puts it, ‘a huge operation has been going on…to deanimate materiality rather forcefully to obtain, in the end, something like a “material world”’ [2016, pp xii-xiii]. This predicament is reflected throughout my fiction in its dramatisation of the cultural and demographic turbulence of the Mangowak biota and mise-en-scene, as well as through the very different mythographic lineages of Crete and King Island as explored in *Archipelago of Souls*. Crucially it is also evident in the attempt I make in my fiction to write of an emotional geography, by asking questions of the land and seascape whilst in turn being asked questions by it. Two-way questions such as those I referred to in Chapter 3: *what to write, to sing, to say?* Or curious quixotic questions such as asking a cave how it came to be and then listening to the timbre of the question’s echo. Or asking the eels where they go when they migrate, and then imagining the answer.

As I have tried to show here, in my novels these questions lead, like hyphae in a mycelium, to generation and creation. The answers are triggered in a conjoined way so as to find empathetic correspondence between our intimate selves and the
world that nourishes us. By filling the space with narratives that include the unseen, the place animates like a friend. It connects to us as a place of personages, memories, sadness, possibility and mythologies, and thus we treat it better (not that there needs to be a moral outcome from responding to the ancient call to sing and tell).

In closing, I choose to declare my agreement with David Abram’s contention that intelligence is no longer ours alone but is a property of the earth; we are in it, of it, immersed in its depths. And indeed each terrain, each ecology, seems to have its own particular intelligence, its unique vernacular of soil and leaf and sky. [1997, p. 262]

In the context of my highly vernacular fiction it also feels important to point out how this idea of Abram’s connects with what Maria Takolander has described in her study of magical realism as ‘the creation of a parochial culture as a strategy of decolonisation…a distancing from the centre…and a means of self assertion’ [2007, p. 48]. Simultaneously too, as this exegesis demonstrates, the inherited emotional ingredients of a single yet protean bioregional phenomenon such as the sound of the ocean can circumvent any obvious need for local colour as a mark of authenticity.

There is a universal human story, of possession and dispossession, of migration and adhesion, grief and loss, in the very air. Our interpretations, or notations, of that air, take on a local sensuousness which, within the inevitably intertextual context of postcolonial Australia, is at the heart of my literary project. A recursive and perpetual motion is set up, akin to the wheel of the stars. We write both high and low, from the universal to the local and back again, from the personal heart of inherited memory to the acoustic community of living voices, whether they be regional, international, real or imagined. Or perpetually implied by the sound of the ocean at night.
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The Ocean Last Night – Creative Artefact
The Patron Saint of Eels

(Picador 2005)

In the southern Italian village of Stellanuova, in the 1700s, a Franciscan monk, Fra Ionio, becomes known as the Patron Saint of Eels when he brings a distraught fisherman’s yearly catch of eels back from the dead in the village market. When Stellanuova’s inhabitants emigrate to Australia in the post World War II migrations of the 1940s, 50s and 60s, the immortal saint is left looking down on an abandoned town. To fulfil his calling, he decides in heaven to migrate with his countrymen and now looks down on the state of Victoria, where he intercedes in matters relating to eels.

In the southern Victorian town of Mangowak, Noel Lea lives with the melancholy inheritance of a place undergoing the gentrifications of contemporary Australia. Along with his oldest friend, Nanette Burns, he longs for a time when life was less complex and unexpected magic seemed to permeate the ocean town and its people. When spring rains flood a nearby swamp and hundreds of eels get trapped in the grassy ditches around Noel’s family home, he and Nanette encounter the vibrant Fra Ionio and get more magic than they bargained for.

Growing up in Aireys Inlet and fishing in the Painkalac we were always catching eels. Hardly surprising in a landscape in which indigenous farming of eels has been practised for thousands of years. The Patron Saint of Eels is a contemporary fable exploring a high theme in demotic language. It gives voice to the community’s relationship with eels in an everyday context, blending the eels’ extraordinary annual migration cycle with the migration of Italian immigrants to the region after the Second World War.

This extract demonstrates the heightened nature of the juxtaposition at the heart of the fable, wherein the seen is reintegrated with the unseen,
and local disgruntlement with tourism and change lead to a hybrid resacralisation of eels in the contemporary environment.
MY BARN IS MY SAVIOUR. These days when I climb up into the manna-gum loft, where once upon a time we stored the sheets of bark we used to build the old huts with around here, and where I now sleep, all my everyday cares and worries just seem to slip away. I can smell the timber all around me, I can feel the sea air as it passes through the many gaps and holes of the unsealed building. I can drift and dream, I can draw and think.

That’s where I was lying when it all started one September night last year. The rain that had been sheeting down for the whole of the previous two days had finally stopped. I’d turned the radio off and was listening to the waves of wind roll in across the tops of the trees and along the chute of the river valley. I wasn’t thinking about anything in particular, maybe about whether the vegetables I’d planted out in the yard below would make it through the weather, when from over near the road, and in between the crescendos of the wind, I began to hear the strangest slushing sound, a sound I’d never heard before, so that I changed my angle lying there in bed, tilting my head on the pillow to hear it better.

Yes, it was a slushy sound, the sound of moving water that you might expect to hear after such a deluge as we’d had, but there was something else about it, an urgency to it, a rhythm of panic about it, and as I lay there the night seemed quickly to become all eerie and weird, as nights can do, especially when you encounter an unfamiliar thing in a place that has long been familiar to you. After a little while I was too spooked to contemplate getting up and investigating as I normally would’ve done. I closed the timber shutter of the old open-air window near my bed. I couldn’t for the life of me work out what the hell the sound could be. It was definitely more than just the sluicing sound of the extra flow of water after the rain; I was used to that. No, it was too frenetic. It seemed to be coming from the ditches that ran alongside the roads, particularly from the one at the front of my house, which is connected to the swamp that’s officially known as the ‘Dick Lake
Memorial Bird Sanctuary. I conceded to myself as I lay there that the swamp could have overflown and run into the surrounding ditches and outlets, but I knew the sound I was hearing was not just that. There was another element to it, something insistent, a creepy glutlish beat to it. Almost a malevolence. So I pulled up my blankets to cover my ears and tried to ignore it, to get some sleep and solve the mystery in the easy light of morning.

* 

Our town is an ocean and bush town where, once upon a time, people used the blue horizon as a spirit level when building a house. The world is useful in more ways than you can imagine, once you really get to know it, and in times past, even in my lifetime, people here in Mangowak were so resourceful they used to make garters out of fishskin, which they’d wear to soothe the gout. Some of the old families around here, like the Owens and the Trahernes, used to rely on the ocean and bush to such an extent that they really did take on marsupial, bird-like and fish-like characteristics. My grandfather, who was a great one for the moonlight, had the sensitive bug eyes of a little sugar glider. And Sid Traherne, before he died, used to spend the hottest days of summer in a kind of burrow he’d dug into the steep slope overlooking the riverflat at the front of his house. Just like a wombat or an echidna.

A lot of those people are gone now. Jolly Owen’s the last one of the Owens around, and she’s only just hanging on, surrounded as she is by wheelchair ramps and little red lights and beeping alarms, as well as her persistent nightmares about the decade she spent cooking for wheat cockies at Yarpeet up in the Mallee. But us Leas are still here, along with a few other stragglers who’ve survived the gentrification, and the Trahernes, of course, are still around, living as they’ve always done in that private world of theirs, that world of amateur naturalism and cross-country golf, still with their original land, and still with that vast and intimate family knowledge born out of the gifts of improvisation and bushcraft, of getting by.

It was Darren Traherne that I first saw when I went out that next morning after I’d heard the strange slushing sound. He was standing at the roadside ditch in
his Rainbird coat, with his big fishing net full of a wriggling mass. Darren’s stout from work, and tanned, with a long brown plait down his back. He’s a couple of years younger than me and very shy, which kind of makes him serious as a rule, but his voice betrays him. It’s clear and young, just the same as it was when we used to traipe around the riverflat with our bug-catchers and stock whips and packets of Wizz Fizz as ten and twelve year olds in the 1970s.

He looked up from his work when he heard my footsteps and let out what was almost a little squeal. ‘Fuckin’ hell, come and have a look at this would ya, Noel. The gutter’s teeming with bloody eels!’

I went over and sure enough he was right, his net was chock-a-block, squirming with eels. As I looked down into the ditch where it runs alongside the pumping station and the boobiallas, it too was a wriggling, gyrating mass. Full to overflowing with the local black eel.

Of course it immediately explained what had kept me awake the night before and I told Darren all about it. ‘I thought I was going mad,’ I said.

Darren kept shaking his head, and then called out, as if to someone on the other side of the road, holding his net of eels in front of him. ‘The Dick Lake’s overflowed with the rain! I never knew there were so many eels in that bloody swamp!’

He looked back down into his net and fell silent, and then turned all solemn. He said, deadpan, ‘They’re bloody nice smoked, you know.’ Not being able to take his eyes off his catch.

Darren went off in his ute to get a couple of the big industrial fishing buckets he keeps in his shed. He figured he’d fill them with the eels and pass some on to his sister, his mum and dad, and some mates. It was funny because we’d always joked that he was dreaming if he thought he was ever going to catch enough fish to fill those buckets he’d found washed up on the beach at Heatherbrae. Now he’d found a use for them after all. He knew it was cheating but I reckoned there were going to be a few cameras clicked that day anyway.

He drove off up the Dray Road to his house on the pub hill just half a mile behind my place, and as I stood dumbfounded by the squirming ditch, Hovva from the fish and chip shop rolled up. He pulled over and stuck his head out the
window.

‘Come and have a squiz,’ I said. ‘You don’t see this too often.’

He got out of his car with a curious look on his face, which quickly turned sour when he took a peek in the ditch. ‘Jesus,’ he said, appalled, ‘that’s disgusting.’

It was a fair enough call. Hundreds of slimy and angry black eels in a ditch at your feet isn’t the prettiest sight in town. But I was more fascinated than anything else. I didn’t find them ugly like Hovva did.

‘How the hell did they get there?’ he asked, taking a big step back.

‘The Dick Lake overflowed with all the rain and it looks like they’ve come through the old pipes under the road. I could hear them thrashing away during the night. It kept me awake for a while, trying to work out what the sound was.’

We stood staring down at the eels.

‘You should grab a few for the shop,’ I told him. ‘They’re bloody good smoked.’

Hovva just raised his eyebrows. We hadn’t had a fish and chip shop in Mangowak till he and his brother in-law blew in and opened one up on the flat in front of the inlet where the old timber and fibro shop we called the ‘bottom’ shop used to be. His brother-in-law was the one into fish. Hovva was just in it for a job, but after only one summer the brother-in-law shot through to Western Australia, taking all his industry connections with him and leaving Hovva to sell frozen Footscray Market flake and trevally with the help of a few schoolkids in the peak times. I doubt whether he’d eaten eel before in his life. And by the look on his face he wasn’t about to.

‘Nah, I’ll be right,’ he said. ‘Bloody weird, though, eh?’

‘Yair, well, I’ve never seen anything like it, that’s for sure.’

Not surprisingly Hovva didn’t hang around too long. He said he had to go to Kuarka Dorla to have new tyres put on his car, but I reckon he just couldn’t stand the sight of it. Anyway, he left me alone there with the eels and before long Darren got back with his buckets. We filled three of them from right in front of where we stood and I got four or five eels in my old yellow laundry bucket while we were at it. You can never say no to a free feed, after all.
ALL THAT DAY THE CREATURES thrashed away in those ditches, and various people cottoned on or were told and stopped to take some or just to have a look. I could see them from behind my tea-tree hedge, which was all in flower, and I could hear their amazement at what the rain had turned up. Some kids came down the hill after school and started poking and eventually slashing at the ditches with sticks. I thought that was a bit much and went out to tell them so. They each took a couple away in hessian bags I gave them for the purpose and left the rest of the eels to their own miry torment.

At one point I could hear a hammering coming from the house at the back of the block behind my barn, and when I went out to have a peek I could see that my neighbour, Bruce, was down from the city and was fixing up a nail on his back verandah rail to skin some of the eels. I was surprised he knew how. He’s always struck me as the kind of bloke who keeps his hands clean. He works in statistics or something, he told me once, something to do with company reports. I wouldn’t have thought he’d go anywhere near an eel, but there you go, you just never know, do you? As my old man used to say, there’s life under every log, no matter how dead it looks. I stood near my barn watching Bruce as he went about it. He seemed to have two or three in an old tartan Esky that he’d placed under his lemon tree not far from where he was fixing the nail. Every now and then I could hear the eels flopping about in the water he’d given them. I couldn’t figure out why on earth he was hammering the nail into the rail without the eel on it. Usually that’s what you’d do – hammer the eel onto a wall or a post and then strip the skin off it. But Bruce had simply hammered in his nail while the eels were still in the Esky under the lemon tree. Wanting to give him the benefit of the doubt, I said nothing and settled in to see how he went about it.

After hammering in the nail he stood back and looked at it for a bit. Then he went over to the Esky and looked into it. He picked up a paint-stained stick lying in the lemon shade next to the Esky and poked amongst the eels. Then he got up off his haunches and, passing the nail, disappeared into his house. He was gone a little while, during which time I could hear some other people
squealing near the ditch back out at the front of my house.

After a couple of minutes I heard Bruce’s toilet flush and then a few ticks later he reappeared at the back of the house with a banana in his hand. Something seemed to be troubling him. He sat on a chair between the nail and the lemon tree and peeled the banana very methodically, looking up at the nail occasionally as he did, obviously thinking about it. Then he’d not so much look but rather lean sideways towards the flopping in the Esky, obviously thinking about it as well. Maybe he’d been told a way to do it and he couldn’t quite remember it, I thought. But I knew him as a very fastidious type of person – I’d watched the way he’d built his front fence, very neat and picturesque, and he took his time about it – so I wasn’t going to come to any conclusions too quickly.

As he ate, and I waited to see what would happen next, I got a potential drawing in my head of an eel nailed up to Bruce’s verandah rail. It’d be good. The sun would be on it so it cast a shadow in a slant. Then I thought of the old nail-clock Jack Toucan used to have on his shack wall and I thought I could draw that. Except the eel would be hanging down from the nail, pointing permanently to six o’clock. I thought I could draw it from memory. Jack Toucan died back when I was about eighteen, just after I went away to Melbourne to study, and his shack burnt down in the fires, but I reckoned I could picture it. I’d been up there so much as a kid with my old man and my mum. Before he retired, Jack had been a travelling salesman for Slazenger and I always loved the old racquets that were hanging on his shack walls, along with old newspaper clippings of people like Lew Hoad and Ken Rosewall winning the Davis Cup. His shack was a couple of miles east of our place, back up the hill out of the river valley and in amongst the bearded heath and tea-tree overlooking the gully beach. It was small and totally rudimentary. Stout bottles were stacked high against two of the outside walls, another wall housed the windows and the door, and the fourth wall his nail-clock. It was like a sundial. He’d hammered a nail into the fibro sticking straight out and facing north so that the shadow it cast on the wall would tell the time. Jack Toucan’s nail-clock used to be famous around here. People reckoned it told its own time and that’s why Jack was always late. Jack himself reckoned he’d always wanted to live by his own clock and that fixing that nail to the wall was the first thing he did when he retired. One
nail. And his life got sweet.

Anyway, I could picture the drawing now. It'd have to have a bit of colour. But the nail’d be coppery, the eel’d be black and the shadow of the nail’d be brown on the pale green wall. I could see the angle of the shadow at about two o’clock, sticking out from the head of the eel. Which would just be hanging there like a dead bushranger. And in the shed Jack and Ron McCoy and my father, and old Sweet William, would be having a few ‘snorts’, as they used to call them, and maybe a game of cards to the sound of the surf and the black cockatoos. At two o’clock. Yep, I could picture it now.

Finally Bruce finished his banana and made a move. He got up, disappeared into the house and returned with a pair of long kitchen tongs. He went over to the Esky and tried to pick up an eel with the tongs. With no success, of course. At this point I realised that he didn’t quite know what he was doing. He might as well have tried to pick them up with a soup spoon! He messed about with the tongs for a little while, then he cast them aside and went over to his van, which was parked at the side of his house nearest my barn. I ducked back a bit so he wouldn’t see me. I didn’t want to embarrass him. And I was a little curious, in a perverse sort of way, about this nail-first method he had going.

When I heard his footsteps again, I resumed my position at the corner of the barn and saw he’d now donned a pair of gardening gloves, the type with rubber fingers, and was attempting to pick out one of the eels with his hands. That’s better, I thought. He was wincing as he groped about in the Esky, avoiding the difficult branches of the lemon tree as he did so, and finally he got a hold of one.

He had it by the neck in his left hand and then after it began to curl itself around his wrist he grabbed its bottom half with his right hand. The gloves were perfect for eel-handling. I must remember that, I thought, because the rubber of the fingers is very rough and textured, so you can get a good grip. I had a pair lying around I’d been given the Christmas before but had only ever used once, when I was trying to fix my TV antenna on the roof in the rain.

He walked the eel over until they stood together in front of the nail, Bruce perfectly motionless, the eel writhing like all get-out. ‘Now what?’ I asked him under my breath.
As he stood there I sifted through the possibilities and decided there weren’t any. Short of squashing the living eel onto the nail with his bare – or gloved – hands. Bruce knew something wasn’t quite right and his air of distaste for the task was growing. I took off, back into my yard, across in front of my barn, out my side gate, around the road beside the thrashing ditch still fighting with stuck creatures, and wandered in a saunter into Bruce’s driveway and past his van. Making as if I was headed to knock on the door I caught him out of the corner of my eye and said g’day.

The frustrated look on his face vanished when he saw me. Saying, ‘Hello, Noel,’ he quickly dashed over to the Esky and, leaning under the tree, dropped the eel back in with his mates. As he did so, the very last lemon hanging from the previous autumn dropped in alongside them as well. No kidding.

We had a quick chat. Bruce was obviously a bit ruffled about the eel, and I set him straight regarding the nail method. He said he knew you couldn’t hammer the nail in first but that he couldn’t bring himself to hammer it through the head of the live creature.

‘Yair, it’s a bit of a crucifixion,’ I said to him, with a laugh.

He looked at me a little strangely then, and I knew why, I’d seen that look before. He didn’t think a local boy like me would say a vaguely cultured thing like that. You know, a word with four syllables. People like Bruce don’t know the half of it.

When I got back inside I looked around amongst the books on the shelves until I found a couple on fishing. I flicked through one or two, looking for depictions of the eel. The nail-clock drawing idea had got me a bit excited and I wanted to make a quick study of how they were drawn.

I made myself a cup of coffee and, with the sound of the thrashing ditches in the background, had a close look at *Anguilla australis*, the short-finned eel, which was the local variety. In the book they had drawn it in a loop, with its mouth open and looking angry. It struck me as I focused on it that people always think of eels as aggressive and angry because the only dealings they ever have with them are after they’ve ripped them out of their habitat on the end of a hook or in a drum net. I imagined that eels were as capable of being as relaxed as any other creature, given
the right conditions at the muddy bottom of some dark body of water.

As I sat down to make a few marks on the page the image that had concocted itself in my head out the back changed a bit. Now I thought I’d have the eel hanging in the height of midsummer, with its flesh and skin having dried out and its skeleton showing against the wall. Desiccated. Good ol’ Australian desiccation, I chuckled. Things dried out, sucked up by the sun. I realised then that drawing a skeleton rather than a fleshed body would create more scope for shadows on the wall too. The pattern of all the little splays and slivers of bone coming off the spine could repeat itself in hues on the fibro wall.

It seems weird now, thinking about working on that drawing in the front room while surrounded on two sides by ditches full of eels. There was something exciting about doing it but something callous as well. Like emotional science. Because the thrashing of the eels all around the house was becoming increasingly desperate. But that’s often the way with these things. My old man always used to tell me that you had to be ruthless to be an artist. He was thinking of a good friend he’d had, Bob Armytage, who used to make his wife cry just so he could paint the result. Bob Armytage probably stuck in Dad’s mind because he was the only artist he knew and admired, but also because of his excessive dedication to getting a picture. When, at sixteen, I told Dad that I wanted to study art, he just laughed and said I didn’t have what it took. He was thinking of Bob Armytage then, I’m sure. He knew nothing much about it, after all. Apart from what he liked. Which is the main thing. But Bob Armytage was his idea of what an artist was. Big and strong, a larrikin with a strange streak in him. Whereas I was a little kid, and far from being a larrikin. He could see I could draw a bit but he was thinking professionally, he thought I wouldn’t make a quid unless I was as much of a bastard as Bob.

Mind you, he did like Bob Armytage. Or admired him, at least. He talked about him like he was someone courageous, someone he couldn’t be, someone he wouldn’t want to be but was glad existed all the same. So when he was trying to talk me out of going off to Melbourne to study I didn’t really take offence because he was also paying me a compliment. He was kind of saying that I was too good for it, that I didn’t have enough of the devil in me. And like most dads he maintained that he knew what he was talking about, as if his wife and kids hadn’t seen
anything of life, and by ‘life’ he meant the dark side, the dangerous stuff. Yair, like most dads, mine claimed the copyright on the dark side of life in our family, and he figured that an artist’d be nothing if he didn’t have a few of the same clues.

Anyway, I didn’t finish the nail-clock-eel right there and then. In fact, I barely even started it, and to this day I haven’t finished it because of the incredible events that followed, but I set the whole thing out and thought I could really sink my teeth into those bones and shadows now that I’d decided on the hot light playing a major role. Because even though the weather was dismal that September, with the rain and all, and a constant bluster battering the cliffs and scouring down our valley, the thought of Jack Toucan’s shack brought back nothing but summer memories. It was as if I never went there in any other season. So, in my imagination, as the eels slushed and churned away all around the house, the walls of which creaked in the wind like a gang-gang, I was picturing an image of January. And the afterlife of an eel.

I think it was at this point that I was interrupted by the schoolkids hitting the ditches with sticks out in front of the hedge. After ticking them off and fixing them up with a couple each to take home, I decided to take a few up to my oldest friend, Nanette, before I made my way to the pub. She’d like that, I thought. And she’d be fascinated by what’d happened.
IT WAS AROUND FOUR THAT DAY when I drove past Joe’s riverbend in the Moke and clapped eyes on Fra Ionio for the first time, though I didn’t know it then. Joe’s bend is the spot where the river comes closest to the Dray Road as it winds its way out of the hills and along the flat to the sea. As I drove by I saw a man sitting over on the other bank of the river, the inaccessible one, which was strange in itself. He was hunched over amongst the reeds with an old South Melbourne beanie pulled down over his ears, staring into the water as if he was saddened by something, and I remember thinking how soothing bodies of water can be for people in crisis. You often see it around here: complete strangers staring at the waves or into the river. People you never see ever again. They just come from wherever they live to think things over, to feel. The water dissolves them, reflects them. My brother, Jim, calls them ‘spinners’. I thought Fra Ionio was just another spinner as I drove past on my way to Nanette’s that afternoon.

* 

Nanette’s had a hard time, living unhappily as she did with her husband, Myles, and their three kids until they split up and she was left on her own. But a more forthright person you would never meet. Strangely forthright. And we grew up together here in Mangowak. She was the first girl I ever kissed. When we were eight. Straight after we smoked our first bark cigarette. We coughed and spluttered, we went blue, then we laughed and then we kissed. She made it happen. She took me into the forest out back, near the duck ponds in the hills above the dam. She pulled out the Tally Ho from the chest pocket of her denim overalls, rolled it up and convinced me to smoke it. It was bluegum bark. I nearly died. She did too. I suppose the kiss was half fun, half consolation.

Nanette is sparky. She’s a redhead and she’s wiry and a survivor. She keeps to herself now that the kids are gone, now she doesn’t have to go to events and social functions. She has an old fire tower on her land that looks over the whole of the East Otways. She checks twice a day for the CFA in summer and autumn, even
though it’s not one of their official observation points anymore. She reckons she’s
grown to love sitting up in that fire tower now that she’s on her own. To make it a
bit warmer she’s added a few basic things, like a bed, for instance, and although
she’s kept the big windows facing west and three little ones looking to the other
points of the compass, the rest of the tower she’s walled in with fibro sheets. When
I turned up in the Moke that afternoon she was just about to head there. I’m a bit
scared of the climb up the ladder but, as usual, she got me to come along.

She lives on fifty-odd acres, part bush, part failed pine plantation, part
pasture. The pines failed because of the fires, which came through not long after
VicTree had planted them. Unlike the gumtrees, they didn’t like the fire blast at
all and now she’s stuck with twenty-five acres of mangled, stunted radiata. It’s ugly
but there you go, life’s not all picnics and equestrian events. Especially not
Nanette’s life.

It’s beautiful out there in those Barrabool hills. For me it’s heart and soul, and
takes me straight back into my childhood and all the stories my father used to tell
me about the magic of the past. Fred Ayling comes to mind. His little camp was not
far from Nanette’s place, just west a bit and up along the Gentle Annie track. Fred
lived out there on his own for forty consecutive winters, cutting what now would
proudly be termed a sustainable amount of timber. He was a great axeman but a
person with that implement can only cut down so many trees. It’s all about
proportion. Proportion and scale. Fred Ayling was a very big man but he was only
one man and the bush was a lot bigger. And he loved the bush, anyway.
Understood it like nobody else. I only knew him near the end of his life when I was
just a little tacker, but he definitely made his impression. You’d see him coming
into town with his swag like something out of the nineteenth century. He’d take a
room at the pub and settle in for the night, to get shickered, to have a yarn and
maybe even a sheila. He had red hair like Nanette’s too. Red hair, fire, austerity and
these hills all seem connected to me.

Climbing up the tower in the wind was a bit scary but I went first, feeling
more secure with Nanette coming up behind me, between me and the ground. It’s
a decent climb too, a hundred and twenty feet, eighty rungs of the ladder. But
once you get up there it’s worth it. The view is unbelievable, virtually one eighty
degrees. Once you’re inside, your eye ranges out across treetops and pastured hills, deep into the west. You see the weather come and go, the sleety drifts up on Benwerrin, the fog that cuddles into the valleys, and on a good day in spring you can actually watch the pollens drift through the air, seeding the whole area.

When we got inside, Nanette let out a sigh and put the kettle on. I could see a half-finished embroidery over on a workbench and a picture of her kids above the little bar fridge in the kitchenette corner, but apart from that the room was still spartan. Nan is not the settling-in type. She’s never really nested. There’s too much sheer energy coursing through her, and these days too many demons in her mind, to let her nest. That, of course, was a major problem with Myles. I’ve never met a man I thought was suited to Nanette. The fact that she had three children to him is amazing enough. Expecting them to cohabitate into old age like any other couple was ridiculous. It’s just a shame she can’t see her kids more often. Emma, Trig and Adrian. Flesh and blood, she bore them, after all.

I’d given her a sack with two eels in it when I arrived at the house, and once we were ensconced in the tower I told her what was going on. Her eyes opened wide as the story unfolded. She, like me, is always on the lookout for a bit of extra magic around the place. She laughed when I told her about Darren finally filling his fishing buckets, and rolled her eyes when I recounted Bruce’s confusion with the nail.

When I’d finished, she squinted her eyes up and asked me what was going to happen to them, obviously imagining something terrible like the ditches drying out and the eels dying in air.

‘I don’t think anyone’s thinking about that much,’ I told her. ‘But the sound of the ditches is getting to me a bit. I was drawing in the front room this afternoon and it started to spook me. They sound so feverish.’

We drank our tea and she rolled us both a cigarette. I don’t smoke much, only occasionally. But the fire tower’s a great place to have a smoke.

I asked her what she’d been doing and she told me she’d been mucking around on the tractor, doing bits and pieces, planting tomatoes, writing e-mails to her kids. She pointed to the embroidery over near the big windows. ‘Doin’ a bit of that,’ she said.
‘What’s it of?’

‘Oh, I just got it out of a book. It’s a Shetland Islands fiddle player.’

I went over to have a look. The embroidery was well done, and the scene was romantic – a violinist with hair flying on a sea cliff.

She said, ‘It’s good for me, you know. To be still every now and again, anyway. Otherwise I feel like one of those bloody eels. Stuck in a ditch I can’t get out of. My brain thrashing away in its own juices.’

‘It’s great, Nan. How long’s it gonna take?’

She took a drag of her cigarette and spoke as she exhaled. ‘I reckon I’m a bit over halfway and I started it a couple of months ago. So, sometime before Christmas maybe. I actually really love doing it, Noely. Who would have thought, eh?’

She smiled. It did seem a little strange, my old livewire sitting patiently at embroidery like one of the old ducks in town. Between us we knew she didn’t have a reputation for patience.

‘It’s tricky too, a bit of a challenge. You can’t do it half-baked. I’ve been propping up here some nights and staying up late. I love the wild feeling you get up here at night. Shits on town. No offence.’

I went back and sat down next to her on the little green couch the CFA had left in the tower along with the bar fridge, the porta-shower and a few other useful odds and ends.

‘What about the winds, though? You’d be knocked around a bit up here the last few nights, wouldn’t you?’

‘Well, yair, I would’ve been, but I haven’t been up here for a few days. Been on the tractor and I’m too buggered by the end of the day. You know that old tractor. Fries the nerve ends.’

I told her how I thought my barn was going to fall over the previous night, being right in the path of the winds ripping up the river valley. Nan’s house is out of winds like that, in a fold of the hills facing north-east – she always calls hers a bandicoot’s house – beautifully sited by Myles who, with the help of a couple of mates, built it from scratch. I joked that she didn’t have to worry about the winds, having married a black belt in feng shui.
‘Yair,’ she agreed. ‘He got that right. The poor bugger,’ she said then, ambiguously.

When we were kids we used to walk in the hills all the time, we’d camp out there and get around wild. From my place on the riverflat those hills are pretty much always in view, silent and dark green, with their lovely undulant line silhouetted against the sky. There was nothing to hurt us out there when we were kids. People go on about this and that – ‘falling down a hole’ was always my mother’s big thing – but really, short of stepping on a snake or putting your hand into a fresh nest of redbacks, there was nothing to be afraid of.

We’d swim in the dams, and yabby, we loved nothing better than looking for a platypus, and we knew a hidden track through the bush at Boonah where we could make it down to a creek so old and untouched that it hadn’t ever been mapped. We called it Shitcan Creek because once, not long after we found it, we took Nanette’s cousin from Adelaide down there and she insisted on shitting in an empty rice cream can instead of on the ground. Thinking back we were pretty rough on her – I can’t even remember her name – taking her through that thick, ferny, dogwoody bush full of leeches and expecting her to adjust. Insisting on shitting in the can was just her reaction to being so put out. She was a bit of a snob, though. Nan and her were about as alike as a crow and a caged canary.

The afternoon was slowly beginning to fade as we sat there in the fire tower looking out, pointing at spots that we’d been to or where things had happened. It’s funny but when we were kids the actual landscape wasn’t that important to us. It was just ground to walk on and water to swim in, while we were swept up in our feelings, our dreamings and interactions with each other. Although we were keen on the platypus, we didn’t notice the birds, for instance, unless something dramatic happened and one of them really entered our lives. Like when that pair of gang-gangs nested in Nanette’s family’s power box and used to turn their power off and on. But then, as you get older something about life seems to turn inside out, and the land becomes the foreground and your own story sits back behind it. When you’re fourteen you just want to light a fire on the beach and spin the bottle. Your preoccupation is the kids you’re with, whether you’re acceptable to them or not, whether they fit in likewise, and you’re always keen on some girl or
trying to make somebody laugh.

Nowadays Nanette and I can just sit and watch the topography for hours without saying much. She’ll blab on a bit, she can’t help it, but actually she loves just to watch the land like I do. If you had’ve seen us mucking around as teenagers you’d never believe we could just sit there and get interested in the line of the hills, or a discolouration in the treetops, or the weather, for god’s sake; you’d say we were bored stiff, but that’s how it is. Perhaps it’s a little bit sad. I mean, we’re both single, kind of alone when maybe we shouldn’t be, but it’s funny, it all makes sense to me, it’s like we’re trying to memorise something, something about the ground we live on, something passed on to us through our families, and ironically it’s as if we have to be alone to do it.

Nan and I have never really talked about stuff like that, we just know it. Maybe she’s never thought about it. But she knows it. She’s not as big a thinker as me. But she’s smart as a whip. I worry about seeming dreary near her sometimes. That’s part of the reason I don’t tell her the things like that which enter my head. She’d rather just look at the drawing. She’ll nod and then rabbit on about something or other, something that’s pissing her off or something that’s exciting her. And then later she’ll offer me a hundred bucks for the drawing. I’ll sell it to her for a bit less, I’ll feel a bit guilty, but then again, I reason, she can afford it.

Every now and then as we sat there a gust of wind would come through and give the fire tower a shake. I’d get a bit windy myself, but looking over at Nan she wouldn’t have flinched.

‘I told you they wanted to dredge the Dick Lake, didn’t I?’ I said.

‘No. Why?’

‘Ah, they reckon they wanna clean up the damage the septic tanks caused to it. Probably just more tourism.’

She shook her head at the mention of the word. The dreaded T word. ‘The shire’s down to only two graders now. My road’s bloody awful. You need to be a fuckin’ horse to get over it. But they’ll throw money at the tourists, won’t they? I tell you, Noel, you can have town. It’s better out here. Bullshit free!’

‘Yair, fair enough,’ I said, a bit annoyed, ‘but what I’m thinking is how weird it is that all those eels got out of there before they dredged it.’
'Well, I never even knew there were eels in that swamp.'

'I don’t think anyone much did. I don’t think even Ron ever set a net in there.'

'Yair, but he’s never liked eel. He reckons it’s too oily.'

'No, he likes it smoked with a nice sweet sawdust. I remember him serving it up at Rhyll’s place once. Plus, if he knew they were there he’d just wanna catch some of them for the hell of it. He’d give ’em away. Or hang ’em over his fence to watch the reactions.'

She snorted in amused agreement.

'I was thinking as I was driving up here,' I said, ‘those eels would’ve been taken out of there in the bucket of a front-end loader if it hadn’t been for that rain. It would’ve been a bloody massacre.'

'Yair, maybe, but what’s worse, Noely? That or dying in those ditches? Poor things.'

'Well, at least this way they can maybe find their way out.'

'They’re lucky for that rain then, eh?’ she said, nodding towards the landscape on the other side of the windows.

I looked out as well. There was a patch of powder blue in the western sky above Silk Hill.

'I’d like to think they knew what they were doing,’ I said after a pause. ‘I’d love it if they could get their bearings and find the river.'

Nan stubbed out her second cigarette, as it was obvious to both of us from the light that it was time to go. She scoffed. ‘I’d love it if I knew what I was doing,’ she said, smiling at me with that beautiful freckled clarity she has when she smiles. And on that note we descended the tower.

As I watched her walk ahead of me on that singlefile track back to the house, I had a sense of her increasing isolation. She was at home on the track, in tune with the scratches and critches and other sounds in the ironbarks around her, but in human terms she was getting increasingly feral. In that way that concerns you. As if she might be forgetting something. A similar kind of thing happened to her brother, Phantom, and he was dead at twenty-eight. Shot himself through the head after six months alone on Yern, the property out near Moriac. He just switched off.
From the community and eventually, and tragically, from life. I don’t have any heavy judgements to make about suicide on moral grounds but in Phantom’s case it was terrible because it seemed to be a case of just letting things slip. We all stopped visiting him because he wanted to be left alone. But really, it was the worst thing for him. We should’ve taken him out of himself. Nanette would’ve normally, but she had three young kids under five, she had her hands full. And their other brother, Keith, was studying medicine in South Africa, so he wasn’t there either. And his mates got the ‘stay away’ message. Phantom was like Nan, very strong character, and sparky. People are a bit wary of them but in the end they can be their own worst enemies.

I decided as we arrived back at the house that I’d ask her to come to the pub with me. She wouldn’t have set foot in there for ages and maybe she needed to have a few drinks and a laugh. Lighten up a bit. But she wouldn’t go. She said she was too tired and had things to do. I persisted but there was no changing her mind. By the time I relented and went to leave she was sending out the vibes for me to nick off. To ‘stay away’. I’d crossed the line. She’s got a shell around her as hard as a terrapin’s.
I HAD A GLASS OF CASCADE at home on the verandah before going up to the pub. The weather had finally cleared and you could feel that perhaps the season was on the turn. I watched the late light show up the spiderwebs on a bridle I’d left near the tank stand a couple of weeks before. The chill was thinning out and the birds were loving it, flirting all over the place. It was a serene evening, but for the swish and hissing water, the sound of the eels in the ditches all around me.

Up at the pub, the eels were naturally enough the big talking point. Things are a damn sight busier around here than they used to be but there isn’t that much going on that people wouldn’t take an interest in something like that. I have a theory that people like it when the bush comes back into their lives a bit. Even though they’ve got carpets on the floors and dishwashing machines and are always complaining the roads aren’t sealed, I reckon it makes them happy when something happens in the paddocks, or on the beaches, or in this case in the ditches, that they can’t avoid. Speaking for myself, though, I definitely like it. It brings the magic back a bit when something unexpected happens in nature. And that night in the pub the buzz in the air was proof enough.

Stories of eels got told in every corner, over every beer and counter meal. Stories of giant ones in Papua New Guinea and albino ones in the Coorong. Some people said they were good eating but a lot disagreed. Some said they were best prepared by the Chinese, who gut them by sticking chopsticks down their gullet and twisting the guts out. That way you can cook what looks like the complete animal. Others reckoned they spontaneously generate without breeding. Kind of like plants. Someone said they’re nice stewed in brandy.

I told them that round here the blackfellas used to call them boonea, and old Ron McCoy reckoned that during the war people’d put dead ones in the front yards of Germans or Italians who lived nearby. ‘Of course, that was until the Italians changed their minds,’ said Ron, sitting on his usual stool at the bar.

It was Wednesday night, pool night, and the bar was fuller than usual. All the younger crew were there as Wednesday was their big midweek night and they
loved their pool. They were all spruced up and happy and saying g’day and settling in for a big one.

I had a chat with Micky Been, Raymond’s son, who worked for us for a little while as he was waiting to go on the pro surfing tour. The Beens are a legendary family of watersportsmen, mainly thanks to Raymond. But now Micky and his two younger brothers, Paul and Oscar, are going great guns as young surfers. All three are pretty talented but they reckon Micky’s the best though he doesn’t like being away from home. He said as much to me one day a couple of years back when we were working, digging post-holes in pink clay up near the lighthouse. He said he’d just like to stay put and surf his local wave rather than head off to Durban or Hawaii or Europe, chasing the kudos of the tour. That’s unusual in a young bloke. Most of them are keen to go but Micky’s a pretty simple young guy. And it’s good. It’s no crime to prefer the coast you were born into. The tip is that he’ll stay back here and take over the running of Raymond’s shop and boardshaping business. And be pretty happy. Listening to K-Rock, he’ll marry his girlfriend and become a local legend like his dad. Saving people from sharks and breaking endurance records in the water. Savouring the local barrels, which can be few and far between.

Although they only live just over the western ridge of our valley, about a mile away across the river in Boat Creek, the Beens and the other ‘clubbies’, as we call them, because they have a lifesaving club there, are a different breed to us in Mangowak. They’re totally focused on the ocean, whereas we divide our map between the shore and the bush out back. We were always more like a country town while they’re more like a suburb of Sydney. Ocean focused and sport mad. I wouldn’t even bother mentioning the eels to Micky because he just wouldn’t be interested. His dad used to be the same. Although he’s a lot older than me, I remember as a kid that Raymond Been was only ever on the beach. He knew the water in so far as you can race in it, surf ski on it, malibu it, but I reckon he barely fished it until the kids were grown up a bit. Now, of course, Raymond’s right into the country as well as sport and he fishes the rocks on the straight beach between our rivermouth and theirs, and heads out back into the bush a lot. I reckon Micky’ll probably develop the same way, but for the
moment he’s more concerned about whether his hair gel’s doing the job than what
the eels in the Dick Lake are up to. And I don’t say that judgementally; no, it’s
probably more natural for a goodlooking twenty-three year old to be concerned
with matters of the mirror rather than the swamp. It’s just how it is. Just the way of
things.

Darren Traherne turned up with his sister, Barbara, and a Polaroid of his
fishing buckets full of eels. They joined the shout that was running with me and
Ron McCoy and my older brother Jim. Of course, we go back a long way with
Darren and Barb and, as a case in point, they are the opposite of Micky and the
other Beens. These days Darren’s bent on carving things out of ironbark. Barb’s
still as freckly as she was when she was a kid, but whereas back then she was chubby
and a bit sooky, nowadays she’s slender and a little up-market looking. That is, of
course, until she opens her mouth. Then she sounds just like her grandmother,
Rhyll. I doubt whether Darren or Barb have ever been on a surfboard in their
life. But if you want to talk about yabbies or ragwort, or what’s in the rock-
pools, or rainfall, they’re the ones. It’s as I said. In Mangowak things are more country.
We’re bushies by the ocean. In Boat Creek it’s the other way around. They’re
sportsmen and sunbakers who happen to have a sea of trees sitting out there
behind them.

Straightaway Barb started asking me about the eels, and after a half-hearted
chat about a building site with Darren, Micky drifted back off to the pool table
where his action was. So, me and Darren, old Ron McCoy, Jim and Barb ranged
over the aspects of what had happened in the swamp.

‘I told them years ago,’ Ron said in his deep, slow, reclusive voice. ‘They
should never have bothered putting the water on. It only brings more people . . .
and more nonsense. Damming the bloody river. What were they thinking? There’s
enough rain around here to keep the tanks full. And to bust the rivermouth
through in autumn and spring. They should leave it alone, bloody bureaucrats.
They should never have had those septic tanks in the first place. It does you good to have
a shit outside. They wouldn’t have had a problem with the eels then.’

‘But the problem isn’t with the eels, Ron,’ Barb said. ‘They didn’t even know
the eels were in there. The problem was the birds not being able to land because of
the silt and the reeds.’

‘That’s tripe,’ said Ron emphatically, his fleshy lips pouting like a bream as he turned to grasp his pony of stout. ‘There’s not that much more reed in there than there was before. The birds don’t land there because they bloody well prefer the riverflat.’

He’d lived on the sea cliff above the swamp since he was born and his little pork-pie racing hat and clean blue jumper could not disguise what hundreds of early dawns and a constant reconnaissance of nature had done to the shape of his face and his complexion. It was only recently that Ron had bothered ‘dressing’ for the pub. He used to get about in blue Yakka workpants and a three-quarter length gaberdine coat at all times, but it seems things can change in a man as he approaches his eighties, and perhaps Ron had decided that sartorial elegance in the form of a hound’s-tooth hat was one way he could improve his chances of a reasonable verdict when his judgement day came.

‘Ron’s right,’ said my brother Jim, who like me had spent hours as a child popping rabbits with a slug gun from Ron’s sunroom window. ‘There’s no contest for a bird, between the riverflat and the Dick Lake. The water’s flowing in the river and the flats are full of food. And there’s the big redgums to roost in. There’s none of that in the Dick Lake.’

Ron nodded in agreement. ‘They knew there were those eels in there,’ he said, the foam of his stout thick on that fishy upper lip of his. ‘The bloody shire aren’t always that smart, but if I’ve been having the occasional feed of eel out of there for the last fifteen years, then they knew they were there. I’ve seen the shire bloke’s nets sitting on the hut side of the swamp. They take pH or E. coli or bloody IQ tests or whatever, and put nets in every now and then to see what’s there.’ He stopped and clicked his tongue. ‘That’s, of course, when they’re not puttin’ up another bloody sign!’

We all sniggered. ‘Spot on, Ron,’ said Jim. No-one hates the local council like my brother Jim. As far as he is concerned, they do nothing other than promote tourism at the expense of us who live here. It was one of his favourite subjects. He stood there against the bar in his khaki work clothes, his strong jaw twitching with relish as he got stuck in. ‘Have you seen the one on this side of Kuarka Dorla?’ he
said. ‘It says TRAVEL TIMES ADVICE 50 M. If it’s not enough to have a bloody sign telling you how many minutes it’s gonna take to get to here and Lorne and the rest, they have to have a sign fifty metres before it telling you that the sign is there!’

We chuckled and shook our heads and dipped our fingers into the bowl of nuts, but Ron was his usual deadpan self on his perch, his old sage-green eyes only just masking his mischief. ‘And who’s bloody well paying for that sign?’ he said. ‘We are. That’s who.’

Darren looked at me and winked. Although we were all pissed off about our rates being spent on such things, Ron was notorious for being a bit tight with his money. He’d barely spend forty dollars a week, he catches or grows everything he eats, and he lives with his ninety-seven-year-old mother on the clifftop block of land they reckon’s worth about three million dollars these days. But it’s just home to Ron. Always has been. And really, when I think about it, it’s not that he’s tight with money, it’s just that it’s not his go. All his pleasures, apart from alcohol, are free.

‘So you do catch eels in the swamp, Ron,’ I said, getting the subject back to the eels. He nodded, silently at first, not wanting to talk for fear of being heard to be poaching. We all took a sip.

‘Been doing it for years,’ he said eventually. ‘They call it a bloody bird sanctuary! The only birds in there are a gang of old moorhens. Occasionally something else’ll stop there, maybe a nankeen heron or a spoonbill or something, but not often. Yair. I’ve put a square hook in there now and again.’

There was a pause then and I considered how secretive Ron’s hunter-gatherer life was. Most of his food was caught between four am and dawn, and I only know that because me and my brothers, and Darren, are the only people he’s ever taken with him. And that’s only been very occasionally. Every now and again I’ll hear a tap on my barn door in what seems like the middle of the night and it’ll be Ron asking if I want to go fishing at the mouth or shooting in the hills. It’s usually when he wants a bit of companionship or when he can’t be bothered driving. So I do the driving. And the talking, the little of it there is. Most times he has his trannie on the talkback, anyway. But he’d never told me about getting eels from the Dick Lake. What other hidden resources was he
tapping, I wondered, sipping my stout.

‘Well, anyway,’ Darren said lightly, ‘that’s one fishing ground that well and truly everyone knows about now, Ron.’

The old fella smiled cheekily, then pursed his big lips disapprovingly, touched his hat, and shook his head at yet another change in his local habitat.

How sensitive or not old fellas like Ron McCoy are to the landscape is a constant question these days. A lot of people say they’re rednecks destroying the place but Ron McCoy’s no cocky, no cranky wheat farmer wrecking the river systems or salting the ground. He’s just a small-fry independent. And he knows the place. He watches and listens. He hears what no-one else hears. ‘The thrush in the underbrush,’ my mum used to say. I said to Ron once that if a ghost of an old Wathaurong tribe member turned up back here one day, Ron’d be the only one he could have a proper yarn with. About the place. I said it to tease him but he took me seriously and said it was probably true.

‘I’ve got nothing against the blackfellas,’ he said to me on another occasion, ‘but just because they’re dead round here doesn’t mean they were perfect. One thing’s for sure, though, they would’ve known a lot more about this neck of the woods than we do.’ And another time he said to me, ‘People are romantics. I’ve heard people in Winchelsea romanticise sandscrapes now they’ve got grass greens. Never forget it, Noel. People are romantics.’

I knew by the way he said it that I was included in that. And that he wasn’t.

The night kicked on. I had couta and salad at the bar, though that’s not exactly what the menu said it was. Speaking of romanticism. According to the board and the new chef from Daylesford I was ordering:

*Local Flashing Couta skillet-seared in a caramelised Provençal jus, served w/ fennel & rocket salad in a drizzle of Moroccan orange & fresh Kelly Country honey.*

What a con! I must admit, though, it was nice, but I would’ve preferred the couta without the caramel and with just a little lemon and garlic and the fennel tops. But yair, it was nice, despite the price, and the bread they serve up these days is always good.
Darren recounted how he’d put three eels aside in his laundry that afternoon and when he went back to get them to take them around to Barb’s place before heading up to the pub, they were gone. He’d stood them in a bucket in the trough and they’d tipped that over and somehow slithered up the sides of the trough and disappeared. So now he had three eels in his house and he didn’t know where. He looked and looked before he had to leave, with no luck.

‘You’d wanna be a bit careful getting into bed tonight,’ joked Jim, and Barb said she reckoned Darren’d end up sleeping in her bungalow for exactly that reason. And then, just as we were all having a good chuckle at this, who should appear coming around the side of the bar and entering through the fireplace door but Nanette. She had a broad grin on her face and strolled straight over to me and gave me a peck on the cheek. ‘Time I got out for a night. Do me good,’ she quickly whispered in my ear, and then immediately greeted the others.

Everyone was surprised as hell to see her. Ron McCoy was particularly pleased. He’d known all of us since we were born, of course, and had a big soft spot for Nanette. He stood up and went straight over and gave her a big puckering kiss, looking just like a gasping mullet in profile.

‘Good to see you, young girl,’ he drawled. ‘I was just starting to get a bit weary of my drinking partners. Now we’ve got fresh legs we oughta go a bit longer, eh!’

‘Too right, Ron,’ said Nanette, and ordered herself a straight Tullamore Dew from Mango behind the bar. Nanette’s appearance did liven things up a bit, even though Ron had only been joking about his boring drinking mates, and it was obvious pretty quickly that she meant business. She knocked back her whiskey in a couple of gulps and ordered another one. Then she went straight over to the pool comp whiteboard and wrote her name up for the next round. Usually the rule is you have to start at the first round and play through in a knockout, but Nan had a certain way about her, and Micky and the others let her get in late.

It was funny, but out of the forty or so people in the bar Nanette only knew about eight or nine. It was that long since she’d drunk there and that long since she’d had much to do with town. And her withdrawal of course coincided with the onslaught of blow-ins. Jane at the post office reckons that the permanent population of Mangowak has doubled in two years. Doubled! Anyway, I’m sure
the younger people around the pool table could sense that Nanette was fair dinkum and not just anybody. I couldn’t help but think that night that she was like a modern-day Fred Ayling coming into town after a long stint in the bush. And I can’t tell you how proud that made me of Nanette. There was magic there. In that freckled face. An old unbottled magic that all of a sudden transformed the whole pub for me back to what it was and what I’d always like it to be. Back when I used to pour beers after stumps as an eight year old. I gave Nan the old wink as she hunched over the cue and got ready to break in her first game.

She divided her time between the games she was playing in the comp and chatting to us at the bar nearby. Darren and Barb and Jim and her were catching up and talking farming and footy and fishing, and then off she’d go to play another shot. And all the while knocking back the Tullamore Dew. She made it through round after round until she got to the semi-final against Micky Been. They knew and liked each other, although Micky was a bit intimidated by Nan, and they had a great game which went down to them both being on the black. By this stage we were all getting pretty tanked and in her inimitably drunken style Nanette started joking with old Ron that her and him probably both needed some sex and that they should head to the caves under the lighthouse at stumps for a bit of how-do-you-do! That had everyone pissing themselves, Ron included.

‘And I tell you what, Ron,’ she said, flushed red in the face with the whiskey and the laughter and the fierce competition at the table, ‘I’ll be on top cos if ya think I’m lying down on the sodden floor of that bloody cave with all those sea-lice, you’ve got another think coming!’

Ron couldn’t reply, he was chuckling that much. In his held-in, silent way he was rocking to and fro on his stool at the bar. As Nan went back to the table to play her shot Barb mouthed that Ron’d die from pneumonia if he had to lie on the bottom of the cave, and then Jim went out to his ute and brought in his old moth-eaten green tarp and put it on the bar next to Ron, which brought the house down. Even Micky and the younger mob were getting in on the act. They’d never seen Ron McCoy having so much fun. He usually sits pretty humourlessly at the bar for an hour or so at lunch and again at night, but Nanette had loosened him up
no end, brought a bit of the old Fred Ayling touch to the place. It was priceless.

A night at the pub like that makes you realise you can’t overdo things. You can’t just reproduce good times by turning up every night – the really great nights come after hard work and a good spell. I’ve noticed that with my drawing too. The best things come when I haven’t been able to do it for a while because of working for dosh with Jim on a landscaping job, and my frustration builds quietly, I get niggly, and then I say stuff it and get up an hour or two earlier of a morning just so I can do some pictures. And I find the magic then. I’m a bit rusty at first but never that much, because I’m always doodling. After a few mornings I get in the swing and the pictures are good because I’ve realised how much I miss their company when I don’t do them.

And that’s a bit what the bar was like that night. Nanette had been out on that farm of hers for too long, holed up in that fire tower with her tobacco and her embroidery – now she’d come in, there was a real release. I hate going on about it but it was like old times. Before the real estate boom and the rules and regs. Before the unexpected stopped happening and legends still walked around. And when I say legends I don’t mean TV sporting legends, I mean people who are legendary just because of their inimitable way. Their own unstandardised way. True types. Jagged and pure, like Nanette.

She got beaten in her semi-final by a beautiful shot from Micky. They were both on the black and he potted it with a long diagonal shot from one end of the table to the other with the white and the black balls starting quite a way apart. They’re the hardest shots, I reckon, but Nan screamed with anguish as the ball went down. She had her eye on the prize. It slipped away.

Micky played a bloke called Phil from Melbourne in the final and we watched with interest, singing a bit at the bar as we did so. Barb and Nan struck up a conversation about ex-husbands. Barb’s bloke had shot through after only six months a couple of years back. He was a charter tour operator who got her pregnant, married her and then took off to Narooma. At first we were told he had a family tragedy there and couldn’t avoid it but when he didn’t come home for the birth of Isabella it became apparent that it was all over. Barb had become pretty anti-men as a result, which is one thing Nanette had never had any time for.
She reckoned men were easier to trust than women when it came to it, so, sure enough, that’s what they were talking about.

Darren and Jim were talking about whether the coral in Bass Strait is better than anything up north because of the colder water, and Ron and I were slowly slipping into a drunken blur. Not long after, Ron got up to leave and the jokes started again about him and Nanette going to the cave, and she hugged him and hugged him and licked his ear before we all finally let him get out the door. He was walking home. Down across the new little estate on the main road and up to his place on the cliff.

‘He’ll be fishing at four,’ Darren said to me as we watched him disappear beyond the lights of the carpark outside.

‘Ah, I don’t know,’ Jim said, burping. ‘I reckon Ron might have a little sleep-in tomorrow morning, I reckon his mum’ll have to walk the dog.’

We kicked on right until stumps at eleven but not beyond. The new publican, Con, is nice enough but he wouldn’t dare break a law by letting us stay longer. Nan got a bit fiery about us being kicked out and told him he was a bore, but Con just blinked and treated her like an old-time local drunk. Which was funny because I reckon he was a little attracted to her when she first arrived all freshened up and ordering whiskeys. But the night had taken its toll. Micky and I calmed her down a bit and Jim took off in his ute as we stood outside with Darren and Barb and I had a piss on the stumps of the old pines that used to grow there. Then the four of us, Nan and me, Darren and Barb, cut across the back paddock until we said goodbye at the gate.

Nan came on down the hill with me, she said she couldn’t be bothered going back up home, and we agreed she should stay the night in town. We walked on under the starlight, on that night of the eels, with no idea what was going to take place, arm in arm, smoking our heads off, tripping on the uneven road, rolling down the hill from the pub as if it was our teenage years all over again.

As we hit the old Dray Road and turned left, Nan was getting maudlin. The whiskey was certainly taking its toll. Before long we were standing stock-still by the ragged roadside and she was literally crying on my shoulder. All this was a bit uncomfortable but it was good for Nan, that much I knew. I thought, she’ll wake
up tomorrow morning exhausted but with the lightened load that a cathartic night on the turps can give you. She’ll be more relaxed than she has been in months. That’s for sure, I thought, as we were standing there.

And let’s face it, she had been having a hard time of it – it’s not every mother who has her kids taken away from her.

As she sobbed she talked about all that but the surprising thing to me was that she said she still loved Myles, despite everything that’d happened. And that was half her held-in grief. She loved the man and wanted him back in her life but knew her temperament wouldn’t allow it. As intimidating and tough as some people are, alcohol can definitely loosen the sluicegate on their torrent of self-doubt. She cried that hard, dry cry of the fiercely independent. As if there was a drought in her tear ducts, or they’d got out of practice at doing the thing they were designed to do. She said she felt ugly and weird and that Myles was so good and reasonable. She said she didn’t blame him for taking the kids away. And that she was glad she never went to court about it, like some people had advised. She said she was fighting something in life but she didn’t quite know what. Her father’s daughter, was all I could think. And all I could do was pat her head and coo like a bush pigeon. Poor Nanette. But she’d be better for all this, she’d be better in the morning.

Finally, after I don’t know how long, the crying tapered off and she began to sigh with relief. Already she felt she’d got rid of some load. She fumbled in the front pocket of her jeans for her smokes and we lit up and sat down on the Owens’ stone fence to have one. We had a bit of a giggle then. I told her that when she first started crying I thought it was because she didn’t get to go to the cave with Ron. And then, looking towards my home, I saw a white owl sitting still as anything on the one power line that crossed the road.

‘I’ve never seen that before,’ I said to Nan. ‘Not out on that wire like that.’ Little did I know what else I would see in the following few hours, events which now seem to have somehow been alluded to by that owl.

Nan and I shared my bed in the loft as we had done many times before, although not for years. She had fun climbing the ironbark ladder, pissed as she was. I managed it all right – sometimes the consoling role can sober you up. We got into
bed and as soon as we were lying still all I could hear was the thrashing of the
ditches. Nan looked momentarily fascinated, but she was too drunk and spent to
really care. In what seemed less than a minute she was sound asleep there next to
me.
THE WIND WASN’T AS LOUD as the previous night so the ditches seemed louder. The sound had become a bit macabre to me now, its pressure was building. I couldn’t really think of much else other than the torment of the eels. It was as if they were humans stuck in a lift with the water rising. In my mind’s eye I saw scenes from a movie I’d watched a week before where the main characters were trying to escape from a rapidly sinking ship.

There was nothing I could do for the creatures, though, short of shooting them all, and I couldn’t do that. I’d never been very good with a gun, let alone shooting into water. So I lay there, trying to get used to the raucous, boiling noise and thinking back over what a great night we’d had. I don’t know how long I lay there, going over what people had said in the pub, laughing at the jokes again, thinking about the pain that Nanette had shown me, and all the while with the slushy cacophony of the eels in the background.

Strangely, after a time I thought I noticed the sound in the ditches decreasing. And it seemed to be a gradual decrease, as if someone was slowly turning down the volume on an amplifier. I lay dead still and arranged my head on the pillow so as to hear better. Yes, the thrashing was definitely decreasing, ever so slowly. I felt a mixture of relief and excitement but, more than that, an overwhelming curiosity. What could be the reason, all of a sudden, for the eels to quieten? Then, of course, I had the horrible thought that they may well be dying, one by one, two by two, and that this gradual attrition would account for the slow decrease in sound. But before that gruesome thought could really grip my heart, I noticed another sound that filled the absence left by the decreasing eels. I was up on my elbow by this time and could just pick up what sounded like the low murmuring of a human voice. But it wasn’t a normal voice, there was a different rhythm to it, and I couldn’t distinguish any particular words because the volume was too low.

I took the rope off the nail, opened my bedside shutter onto the night and peered out, making sure I didn’t entirely drag the bedclothes off the sleeping Nanette. The night was semi-clouded. In the south I could see some constellations
but there was not much of a moon, so visibility was low. I could make out a figure, on the track near the ditch at the front of the house, moving along, back and forth beside the ditch and in and out of the large clumps of trident reeds that grow alongside it at its lowest points, and wearing what looked like a beanie, and a robe or something, with bright white shoes on his feet. The shoes virtually glowed in the dark. The figure kept moving along the ditch, and in and out of the reeds. As the sound of the eels decreased further, I could hear in its place that this murmuring had the rhythm of a chant, almost as if the figure was singing.

I caught myself leaning out the window and lay back suddenly. It was so odd. There was a man out there, dressed very strangely, and seemingly he was chanting to the eels. In the middle of the night. I thought of waking Nanette but for some reason or other I couldn’t, or was too afraid to. I just couldn’t quite believe it was real enough to bother her with. And yet, looking again out the window of my loft, there he was, coming back into view along the ditch, about eighty or so yards from where I was, and, listen – there was his chanting, his strange high and low murmuring that now seemed unmistakably connected to the eels.

I sat up for twenty minutes or so, captivated and a little scared by these strange goings-on, what with the low moon, the weird staccato swish and thrashing of the ditches that I’d been listening to for twenty-four hours, and the return of a bit of old Mangowak magic to the pub. At one point I thought I just had to be dreaming, and that I was inside the dream viewing myself. But no, I’d shake my head and knock gently on the jamb of the window to hear the sound of waking life. And yes, that was the sound, of flesh on wood. But listen to that chant in the night. I was pretty sure it wasn’t even in English, and now I thought I could hear something like the tinkling of a bell along with it.

Eventually I couldn’t resist it any longer. I gently clambered over a snoring Nanette and climbed down the ironbark ladder to the ground. Tripping over a saddle I’d been mending, I finally made it to the door without waking her and, having thrown some trousers on and a scarf and jumper, stepped out into the yard.

It was cold. I didn’t have any shoes on and the ground was freezing. I stood still and listened again. I could no longer see him because I didn’t have the
vantage point of the loft, but I could hear him still. And the eels were almost completely quiet now.

I walked around the barrier of the vegetable patch and towards the voice. Along the side of the main house I went, my murals on its walls barely visible in the dim night, past the water tank and my father’s old weather station, and then, standing amidst the pelargoniums, I saw him clearly, barely twenty feet away. Over on the other side of the hedge and across the track. Just as quickly, though, he disappeared into the reeds, which grow right there as tall as a man, and I could only hear him again. From within the rustling of the reedy dip as he moved, his voice was unmistakeable.

I stood still and waited. I remember I was cold but full of adrenalin, and that the scent of the pelargoniums beside me was thick and familiar amidst the weirdness of the situation. For a time he seemed to have stopped still within the reeds, and although his chanting hadn’t quietened, the little bell-like sound I’d been hearing had. Then his voice fell silent as well. I began to wonder whether the whole thing had been some kind of apparition but before I could turn around and make my way back to the barn, the bell started to ring again from within the clump of reeds and, suddenly, he reappeared. He stood beside the ditch and looked into the southern sky as he continued his murmuring. I could see now that it was a beanie he wore, and that what I thought was a robe of sorts was actually a monk’s habit, roped at the waist with a cord from which hung the little tinkling bell. And, yes, on his feet were a pair of glaringly white skate shoes, with the brand name GLOBE on the heels in an almost iridescent pink that stood out in the night like phosphor.

He walked slowly along the ditch, disappearing in and out of the reed cluster, his left hand on the waist cord just above the little bell and his right hand gesturing, palm open, to the ditch. And, yes, he was chanting a soft chant, like a prayer, and he seemed to be offering it to the ditch, to the eels. Back and forth he went, his volume never wavering, his voice rasping but comforting, not smooth but unmistakeably kind. His intention was clear. He was here to calm the eels.

For a moment I didn’t know where to look. I thought of running back and getting Nanette but as the moments passed I became mesmerised by the chant
myself, so that my heart quietened and my breath stilled. The chant had an ebb and flow, a swelling motion, a bit like the tide.

He disappeared into the reeds once again and his voice grew stronger in its rhythm, and even more consoling. And then I heard my name used and an invitation spoken in a thick Italian accent.

‘Noel, why don’t you come closer now and see how peaceful they’ve become.’

My jaw dropped. I looked up from the ground where I had been staring, listening in concentration since he’d last disappeared into the reeds, and there he was, small and smiling with an open face, like some Mediterranean woodcut come to life, gesturing at me with his arm to come over and join him at the ditch. I was shaken again. How did he know my name? How the bloody hell did he know my name?

I walked out of the pelargoniums and felt my bare feet on the gravel of the track. And then I was standing beside a short man with a few black whiskers scattered over his chin and jaw. With an expression of what I could only call bemused triumph on his face, he looked up at me and then down at the eels, which lay entwined and still in the ditch water at our feet.

‘They were in so much hell,’ he said in a broken kind of English. ‘They can rest now for a few moments before you help me guide them to the river.’

Straightaway at the mention of the river, I remembered seeing this man sitting on the riverbank in the afternoon on my way to Nanette’s. It was the spinner in the South Melbourne beanie.

‘I saw you this afternoon at the riverbend,’ I told him.

‘Yes, I saw you in your little red car too,’ he said. ‘You passed by. I was preparing for tonight. Talking to the fishes. Asking if everything would be all right.’

He paused and then looked at me with a childlike grin and said, ‘I’ve come to help the eels.’ And he put out his left hand, taking it away from where it held the waist cord just above the bell, and with my right hand I went to shake it, but could say nothing.

My hand fell away and he smiled and spoke in Italian. Before I had time to ask him to explain he had pulled a packet of cigarettes out from under his cassock and I understood that he was merely asking me if I’d like one. I looked down at the
packet and declined out of sheer confusion. He lit one up and then pointed into the southern sky.

‘Now that they are calm,’ he said, ‘we will concentrate on that star. See the one, the brightest one? Above the ridge of dunes? Yes. Il luce forte. With a radiance such as this we can help these creatures of the darkness, these blessed anguille. We can help them along on their magnificent way.’

He took a drag on his cigarette and seemed to notice my confusion. ‘It’s all right,’ he said, patting my shoulder. ‘When the duty is done and the sun is risen and we get to know each other a little more, everything will be much clearer. Ah,’ he said then with a sigh. ‘Listen to the music of their contentment at last. As long as they are in pain so am I. But now the peace has arrived, the panic has been lost, and soon they’ll be safe and back in the warmth of the deep darkness.’

He gazed lovingly down at the eels and smoked his cigarette with his left hand. With his right hand, with which he had pointed to the southern star, he tinkled his bell again, the little silver bell that glinted in the light of the night, and which, along with the two-note scale of the owl, was the only sound now that the eels were still.
THERE WAS ALMOST A SILENCE now, a rich, new silence, since his calming of the eels. Not even the crashing of the surf was audible on the other side of the dunes.

When he had reached the end of his cigarette he turned to me and said: 'You see, the river is a forest, Noel. It is to the eel what the trees are to the birds and beasts. It is home and it is private. A place to be lost and found. To be safe. With pockets to hide. A place to fulfil a unique destiny. And the smells! The scents and perfumes of the riverbed! I have been to the bottom of the riverbed. Many times. With my nose quivering. I know what they love down there, the oneness, of the slush, l’unità, the oneness of the dark. I know what to us is a murky stench and what is to them the breast of God’s earth. The sweet smell of the river’s bottom. With good water above you. Pure murky gloom. Not the pathetic cider in these drains! This is not enough!

‘Let’s show them the way, encourage them towards their happiness. They needed to be calmed. It’s not their time of year to move. Non allarmare. But now they may proceed. And you and I will walk along beside them. We will accompany them to the river, out of these ditches. What do you say?’

But, of course, I didn’t know what to say.

He began then to progress to the river and I followed him in silence, along the side of the ditches, which were now tranquil. Although the night was settled on the land and there was no sign yet of the sun, I flashed forward to its rising and wondered whether this man would dissolve into the daylight and be gone. There was no wind now, and, with the thrashing stopped, the world seemed to have come to a standstill. As he chanted, the tone of his voice began to soothe me and allowed me to proceed with him, to concede to accompany him in what seemed to be a great passion.

So we stepped on towards the river, the oddly dressed little man ringing his silver bell and murmuring in the direction of the eels, and me walking gingerly behind him. In the ditches as we went there was a quiet sound beside us, of motion, of living things gliding and slipping through water, a gentle threshing of
liquid. In front of me his chant continued, his head level. Now he was speaking it as much into the air as down at the eels, his thumb crooked into the cassock cord and tinkling the little bell there. The creatures now slipped through the water seemingly in the rhythm of the chant, their skins mercurially appearing at the top of the water, like a welder’s flux, or the light on a raven’s wings.

I watched the glints in the ditch and his glowing white shoes in front of me, stepping along on this ground I’d walked a million times. He looked back once or twice as we went along, smiling, not stopping his chant but, yes, smiling almost uncontrollably as his mouth moved around the presumably sacred words. It wasn’t long, then, before this little party of eels and a monk and a man had covered the short distance along the road to the river.

I stepped back in deference as we arrived at the bank but he gestured me forward to stand beside him. His chanting stopped and in the ditches the motion of the eels had ceased. I couldn’t work out whether they’d slipped away down the lip of the ditch into the river or had just paused below the watertop of the ditch. Ripples were settling as I looked down, but there seemed to still be a sense of them within.

He turned to me and said: ‘For now, Noel, my name. Fra Ionio. Si, Ionio. One day you might not believe this has happened but take it from me, it is the simplest thing.’

He then gave his bell a tinkle.

‘To every prison in this life there is a key inside the heart.’ He gave his bell another tinkle. ‘And for every agitation there’s a reason.’

He rang his bell again then, almost as if he was letting the eels know that although he was talking to me he had not forgotten them.

‘The traffic just went by all day, Noel. The birds in the sky, the cars on the road. And their panic built. You heard the thrashing. The desperation. Half the world is thrashing like that every day. If you choose to you can hear it. Everyone is driving past. But the rain helps. It washes and flushes, and the water, it is love. L’acqua è amore.’

And then, easy as you like, as we stood there, the eels made their move, tumbling in rills and curlicues, in motion once more, slipping and twirling one
after the other, in groups and singly, entwined and in loops, out of the steep mouth of the ditch and into the river. Never before had I looked at eels without thinking of their teeth.

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It took a few minutes, I suppose, for the tumbling transfer of the eels from the ditch to the river. We watched them wordlessly, their slick skins gleaming sepia, and when they had all slipped away into the river, he turned to me with his cigarettes at the ready again.

‘Come on, Noel, surely you will have one with me now, to celebrate.’

‘Okay,’ I said, and bent towards him to receive the light.

We found a nice flat spot on the bank and sat and smoked and looked into the rivertop. His cigarette end was about all I could see in the darkness except for the odd splashes of brightness near the streetlights away on the opposite hill. On the surface of the water in front of us, though, all kinds of shapes appeared and disappeared. There was no moon giving off the reflections, it was just the eels still crinkling the water in the scant light, showing up to me now, glowing and vivid as if my focus on things had suddenly strengthened, as if the detail of the world had intensified and I was noticing it in the surface of the river.

As I smoked the cigarette he was prattling on quietly, almost under his breath, to himself and the eels in what I presumed was Italian. He smoked quickly, like a bogan, or a gangster in a movie, with the cigarette between his fingertips and thumb rather than between the knuckles, and every now and then he’d give his little bell a ring and I’d be reminded of when I first heard it up in my loft only a short time ago. But time was warping now, reality was changing.

He cocked his head to one side, a bit like a sheepdog does, and said to me, as if I’d known him for years, ‘The eels, yes. As long as they are le anguille they won’t know what it is to draw a picture. Hah! And you won’t know what it is to live in the sheath of the river, Noel. You won’t know what it is to cross the seas for love. You know?’ He slapped his thigh gently and sighed. ‘Oh, there’s nothing like a job well done, is there, Noel? Time is il maglio, time is the tool, no? Time cleans out the
stables.’

No doubt I was looking bewildered, so he turned to me and said again that I wasn’t to worry. Then he rang his little bell and began to chant, and I swear that the eels in the rivertop were animated and glossy and magical to watch. The shapes on the water seemed to do a fillip and a dance, as if all of a sudden something was spawning.
FOR HOWEVER LONG IT WAS before the first creeping light of the morning started to filter out from behind us, we didn’t say another word to each other. Ionio murmured away to himself in his language and I sat still, entranced by the situation. As we noticed the first rays of the sun he turned slowly towards me and asked me to take his wrist.

‘Yes, Noel, wrap your fingers around this hairy wrist of mine. That’s it. Now, can you feel my skin and the life in me? Am I made of flesh and blood? And you are looking at me. And we are here in Mangowak. So, Noel, feel my wrist and know that Ionio is real, I am here and this is not a dream you are having. Yes?

‘And now you must let go of my wrist and take me somewhere safe. Where no-one will meet me. Somewhere we can rest and talk. Where we can spend the whole day together and not be interrupted. For by the time this new sun has crossed the sky I will be gone again. What do you say?’

I let go of his wrist but still couldn’t speak. As for taking him somewhere safe, I was momentarily incapable of thinking about it. It was too much for me.

We stood beside the river but turned now to face in the direction of my place and although another person might have been more wary or afraid, I found that suddenly I had no desire other than to spend the day with him as he’d asked. My curiosity grew with the light as it brushed over the ocean and the inlet valley and the hills, and I saw his face more clearly than before. I saw that his skin was the colour of terracotta and that his nose was small like his mouth. And importantly, I saw the life in his dark eyes, the gentleness and the lustre.

It wasn’t long before I heard a dog bark around the riverbend and I had the idea. Nanette was presumably still asleep in my loft. We could just go and wake her up and jump in the Moke and head out to the fire tower. No-one was ever going to interrupt us up there. We could grab some food from Nan’s fridge, and stay up there looking over those Barrabool hills all day, and find out who this Ionio was, and where he was from, and what the eels had to do with it, and how come all of a sudden life was a totally different kettle of fish.

Naturally enough, he thought the fire tower was perfect and didn’t seem at all
perturbed at the prospect of bringing Nanette with us.

‘We had a late night,’ I told him. ‘She got very drunk and is still asleep in my bed.’

At which point he laughed, at the top of his voice, loud enough to wake up the sleepers in the row of riverbank shacks nearby.

‘It’s not like that,’ I assured him anxiously. ‘We’re old friends, it’s not like that.’

Whereupon he laughed even harder, this time so much that he held his sides and threw his head so far back that I could see right into the pinkness of his mouth. By the time he’d pulled himself together I’d been well and truly put on edge. I was rattled, looking about me and waiting for someone to emerge in their dressing gown to tell us to shut up. But the track and the verges were all empty and still. It was just me and the monk and the dawning day.

‘I’m not laughing at you,’ Ionio said, wiping his eyes and checking to see if his little bell was still there. ‘I’m laughing at the crazy gaps – huh? – in this world. You and your friends were at the pub getting drunk and I was walking the beach in preparation for the diaspora of the eels. And yet we were only a mile apart. It’s crazy, Noel. I love this earth for the very reason that it’s crazy. The roots of heaven are to be found here, in people getting drunk in the pub and other people walking alone on the beach, in people in hospitals shouting with pain and animals being slaughtered for no good reason. All of them longing for heaven.

‘It’s crazy, the gaps, and it makes sounds, you know. Things hit things here. It’s *la Dissonanza*. Even the birdsong is born of this friction. And from this comes heaven. The very word, *Paradiso*, the very thought, it comes from here.

‘It feels good for me to visit you, like I am covered in the sweet-smelling soil. I am happy, my body laughs. My soul hears the divine choir.’

We walked away from the bank in the direction of home and as we did, Ionio’s laughter quickly turned to tears. I saw them there in the dawn, rolling down his slightly hangdog face, falling onto the lips of his little red smile.

‘Happy eels,’ he said to me and to the sky, with a quaver in his voice. ‘I exist to make them happy. Right now I have hundreds of happy eels inside my heart,
healthy and free, tickling my fancy. I am blessed to be chosen il Patrono San delle Anguille.’ And then, putting his hand on my shoulder, he said, ‘Come on, amico, let’s go see how loud your good friend’s snoring.’

He made a sound through his nose like a donkey’s ee-aw, laughed with a shriek and we wandered off the grass of the bank and onto the golden Barrabool gravel of the river road.
Ron McCoy’s Sea of Diamonds

[Picador 2007]

On the wild clifftop of the coastal town of Mangowak, Ron McCoy lives an almost marsupial existence with his elderly mother. He hunts and gathers while the town sleeps; he is acutely shy, but in the privacy of his imagination, fostered as it is by his love of music and the oceanscape of his birth, all things are possible.

The surrounding landscape is full of alchemic power and mystery and when Ron McCoy and his mother decide to sell half their land, the subtle generational differences between young and old Australia begin to swirl.

In Ron McCoy’s Sea of Diamonds the reality of emotional geography is explored in the tragic context of a family saga. In many ways this is a story about the personal everyday consequences of the commodification of a bioregion. It demonstrates too how the founding materialist principles of white colonial Australia’s relationship with country enshrine a lack of acknowledgement of the very real psychogeographic traction in the cultural landscape. Thus non-indigenous characters such as Ron and Min McCoy come to experience their own form of post-colonial dispossession in the contemporary context of a coastal lifestyle boom.

The following extracts from the novel focus on the intimacy of the McCoy’s emotional geography in Mangowak. The extract dramatises some of the ways in which grief and consolation become symbiotically connected with biota and place.
Chapter Two

The World Through Hexagons

There was a bench in the clearing on the cliff made of mountain ash and his father had built it for the men he'd known but could know no more. Well, they were boys actually, boys he'd grown up with in Winchelsea who, unlike him, had not been diagnosed as colour blind, and who went away to war, destined never to swim under the bluestone bridge which crossed the river of their home town ever again.

Len McCoy built the bench with judgement and care, sourcing the timber himself on the bush ridge out near the duck ponds, milling it by hand once it had dried on the long noggings down the eastern side of the house, and fixing it deep into the ground with concrete footings so as to withstand the Bass Strait winds which came in a direct line to them from the South Pole. He had intended to leave it then as it was, to silver in the weather, a mute testimonial to a tragedy beyond words, until his wife Min suggested he carve a note of its purpose in the timber, an eloquent phrase of memorial that would speak to those who might sit on the bench opposite the Two Pointer rocks, long after they'd passed on.

She dug amongst her things and in a leather-bound book which her father had read aloud from when she and her sister Elsie were small, The Gift of Poetry, and which he'd subsequently given Min to take when she decided to move out of the city to Mangowak and marry Len, she found some lines she thought struck a perfect note, blending a sense of the beauty of life with her own defiant anti-nationalist attitude to the war:

Young men are for living not for dying
For laughing and working, loving and crying
Each man’s thought is his own country and home
True friendship’s the highest goal to attain
Len McCoy didn’t say what he thought of the lines Min had chosen, on such an issue he would always defer to her, but immediately he began drawing up the template in grey-lead so that he could carve the words into the bench. It took him three full days of the utmost concentration to finish what in the end was a reasonable job, legible and quite evenly set, and luckily he had a fine brace of light winter northerlies to do it in. Below the lines from the La Branca poem which Min had chosen was added: ‘FOR THE FALLEN OF THE GREAT WAR 1914–1918’.

By finishing the bench and the inscription, Min knew that her husband had done himself a great favour, assuaging the guilt that he carried with him always, that so many had died and that he had stayed behind, seeing blue for green and never seeing red at all. At least now he had said his piece in a permanent fashion, and although the words of the La Branca poem were an integral part of his bench, it was in actions rather than words that a man like Len McCoy could express himself.

They were an unlikely couple, Len McCoy and Min Mahoney, a hybrid of the silent taciturn plains of Winchelsea and the clinker-bricks and garrulous high collars of Melbourne, which was where Min had grown up. Her mother had died of meningitis when Min was six and although her father was nothing more salubrious than a barber in the working-class suburb of Clifton Hill, Papa Mahoney, as young Ron would come to know him, was a man who worked with a phonograph playing in the corner of his Spensley Street shop at all times, a man who lived for music and literature and who showered his two girls as they were growing up with an almost feminine affection of culture and emotion, acutely aware as he was of the absence of a mother in their lives.

Min met Len at a Footscray football club dinner, to which she’d been invited by her cousins on the Maribyrnong side of town. For those present it had been an important night, a fundraiser for the club that was trying to make a case to be included in the Victorian Football League. For Min, however, the night was important on an entirely different plane.

It was like earth meeting sky. As she sat opposite Len McCoy’s handsome and healthy face at the dinner table, the muscularity of his torso showing through his
tight starched white shirt, she’d never felt a physical impulse quite like it. Min was small, and pretty, with jet-black curls and dark eyes, and she could be very demure and sweet, but her father’s education had also encouraged in her a tendency to be headstrong and aloof, and occasionally haughty as well, and now she found herself quite confused by the unabashed exuberation that was coursing through her in this young countryman’s presence.

Sensing Min’s willingness, Len McCoy was not about to let the opportunity slip. Despite her mother’s diamond brooch, her fine ways and the difficult things she said to him across the plates of lamb and beef and the FFC monogrammed bowls of peas and potatoes, he figured she was still working class and therefore within reach. They danced amongst the club members and associates that night, Min suddenly more fascinated by life on a sheep and poultry farm at a place called Winchelsea (which he told her was a godforsaken place, famous only for introducing the rabbit to Australia) than anything else in life, and Len more charming and impressive than he’d ever imagined he could be.

His trump card, as he saw it, was that he was on the verge of leaving his family’s farm and striking out on his own. He’d recently been on the scout and seen a bit of land on the coast at a place called Mangowak, and he was hellbent on buying it. He’d not told a soul about this but soon found himself describing it closely to Min. It was a tiny piece of land, barely six acres, cleared for the most part for grazing, but with the remnant of a pine windbreak which would provide perfect shelter for a house site. It was right on the ocean-cliff, perched above a series of small coves and beaches, where tea-coloured creeks ran down out of the hills to the sea every mile or so. Mangowak itself was not far from the timber and fishing town of Minapre, but it was just a rivermouth, with a cleared pastured riverflat, and until recently the block he had his sights on had been government land attached to a Meteorological Station. The six limestone buildings of the Meteorological Station were built in a cluster on the headland to monitor Victoria’s prevailing southwesterly weather, but now that the station was becoming increasingly automated the few acres surrounding it were for sale.

In a sense he was right about this being his trump, for Min was excited, not by the land, but rather by the audacity of it all, of this young boy’s willingness to leave
behind everything he knew to make something independent of himself. He had already teed up work with a certain Mr Bolitho, who owned the large pastoral lease of the riverflat and the upslopes, and who was prepared to offer Len McCoy a future. Given the extent of the attraction she was feeling it was all Min really needed to know about his character. She didn’t need to know, for instance, that for Len the move to Mangowak was nothing much at all, not compared with the move his boyhood friends had made, the heroic move against which he constantly measured his own inadequacy. No, it was enough for Min to have learnt that Len McCoy – from ‘Winch’, as he called his home town – was an adventurer, and also that he seemed a gentle soul like her father, which she’d sensed from the moment they’d been introduced.

By the time the dancing was over at the end of the evening they both agreed it was a great stroke of luck that they’d met. They came together in the chill of the grandstand, amidst the cooing and rustling of the pigeons that roosted in its eaves, and as they looked out over the shadowy oval at the city lights beyond, they briefly touched before parting with an arrangement to stay in contact. ‘And the sooner the better,’ Min had boldly suggested.

By the following autumn of 1922, Len McCoy and Min Mahoney were married and living in a makeshift slab bark hut on the block of land they christened ‘Belvedere’, on the cliff beside the Meteorological Station at Mangowak. Together they fenced their land with post and rail, a chain back from the cliff edge on the ocean side and butting right up along the bullock ruts on the inland side. They left an entrance the width of a dray in the fence alongside the bullock ruts but just one small melaleuca gate on the ocean side to access the open cliff. Whilst Min planted a gardenia, a camellia and nectarine trees on the block, cooked and sewed and read inside the hut, and went for long familiarising walks in the skirts and frills of the tide on the empty beaches (they were strewn that autumn, she would always remember, with copious amounts of kelp and sea-cucumber), Len and his brother Dinny laid the yellow bricks of what was to be the McCoys’ only married home, and the house into which young Ron was born.

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It was dangerous to leave him as a little child out on the cliff by himself but that’s where he wanted to be. Otherwise he would either howl and squeal in the house or mope in the garden. The roar of the cliff was a magnet, and anything else in his midst seemed dull by comparison, like ox tongue or tripe on his plate, like devilled kidneys when there were strawberries and ice-cream nearby. So, at Min’s suggestion, Len erected a chickenwire cage around the La Branca bench, to act as a playpen for the boy. On fine days then, Min could leave him unattended where he liked it most, out on the open cliff, and go about her chores.

At first he hardly even noticed the restriction but when he eventually did, the little boy’s tears were panicky and Min had to sit beside him and give him the options. It was the chickenwire cage, or the kitchen, or the garden. Or, if he refused them all, the wooden spoon. Very quickly his tears were quelled by his preference for the clifftop, even if he had to view the wider world through the hexagons of the cage. Overwhelmed by all there was to see and all there was to do on the bench from within the chickenwire cage, by the ants and skinks and tiny whorling shells in the bindweed and dirt around him, by the passing birds and seaspray and cloud formations in the sky, he calmed right down and eventually grew content with his confinement.

From the time he was two right up until he was six years old, Ron would be placed inside his chickenwire pen and left to his own devices, although by the time he was four and a half the chickenwire and posts had to be raised to curb the growth of both his body and his tippy-toe curiosity. Straight out across from him the Two Pointers, King Cormorant Rock and Gannet Rock, loomed out of the sea to the same height as the cliff. On these massive discarded crumbs of the mainland, black cormorants and other large seabirds – gannets and sea eagles, even falcons – liked to roost and dry their wings after a feed. The boy was a natural witness and could watch their comings and goings endlessly. Until, of course, the milk ran out in the bottle and he’d no choice but to cry until she came.

With the house built and her son growing, Min went about her daily business, but always with an eye open or an ear cocked to little Ron out on the cliff in his cage. It was a practical idea and he seemed perfectly content, but she had to be careful. It was safe all right, he couldn’t go anywhere, but wallabies and foxes liked
to graze out there and she wasn’t absolutely sure they’d have no interest in him. Or his milk. More than that, though, it was the weather she had to worry about.

The blows came out of a wild source that was always brewing in the southwest. The bench in the chickenwire pen, on the cliff facing the wide and changeling sea, was first port of call for any squall that hit. She kept an eye on the ocean for bluster and flecks and on the sky in the west and south for inky tints in gathering cloud. With Len’s help she learnt to pick the patterns. More often than not bad weather would pile up at the big rainforesty hills some six miles across the sea behind Minapre, and then it would split in two, in one direction along the horizon line to the south, out into the far ocean as a wispy tempestuous knot, and in the other direction along the faultline inland where the hills finally dwindled. In this direction it would then head away with the wet forest’s tapering off, into the drier messmate and ironbark country to the north.

This was the pattern by which most of the rain and bad wind dispersed to either side of their headland but if it did come straight on and scudding across the open expanse of water from the hills in the west, it could rip straight off the sea and scare the little one clean out of his wits. Perhaps, she dreaded, it could even blow him away, dash him onto the rocks below. He was game enough, the wind didn’t seem to bother him at all, whereas other children would’ve howled along with it, but at the very least he could catch his death out there in the wrong weather. At the mangle or the sink she was always near enough to a window to watch the fronts develop. She’d watch them pile up like bruising and then see them separate, as if at some kind of crossroads, out over the sea and back into the distant timbered hills. That was where any danger would come from. The northerlies that came from behind them were no trouble to the cage. They held hot desert fire within them during the summer but as a city girl she was proud she’d learnt to pick a northerly three days in advance.

The boy was, in fact, caught in the weather once. His father burst out of his open shed amongst the bushes along the cliff to find him drenched and frightened underneath the bench as an October downpour came out of the blue. Len was incensed. Where in Hades was Min? With Ron slung over his shoulder like a sack of grain he rushed back through the clicking melaleuca gate in the rain and into the
house. He found her on the floor in the laundry, unconscious. He shook her awake and her eyes opened and he realised. A miscarriage. She'd fallen down and the world had gone black. The boy may as well have been as far away as Melbourne for all she knew. He stood Ron on the floor and told him to get his clothes off and dry himself. He threw him a gingham tea-towel. And in his arms he gathered up his little birdlike wife and carried her in to the bed.

Min was out of action for two days. As soon as she felt the blood had all passed from her she started making soup. Then she made bread, almond biscuits, and then more soup, with the fish heads and frames from Len's daily catch, and then a series of jams from fruit Len had procured in his travels. Apricot, cumquat, plum, marmalade, preserved and graded in the pantry. As it drew towards Christmas her chirp started to return a bit. She began to sing again. Amidst her work ‘My Coral Delight’ came to her over and over, a Hawaiian string tune that had been popular with her father and his friends in the weeks before she had left town. The deep, relaxed sway of the Pacific song helped her restore. By the time she had, the next winter's jam cupboard was stocked up to the hilt.

For Ron the sea of diamonds had all begun in the chickenwire cage. It was the fox that had first told him. Unbeknown to his parents Ron was quite familiar with the fox, whose lavish coat would appear from time to time at the edge of the tea-tree in a smudge of russet. The fox would sniff, snout in the air, or dart through the clearing after bristlebirds or small bush mice.

Any fool could see it, the fox had told Ron. All you had to do was look. The glitter out on the water was proof. The sea was full of diamonds. It was bursting with them. Of course the fox was casual about it, as diamonds were of no use to him, but looking out there it made sense to Ron, it was right in front of his eyes, and he was off. So much so that with the new information he quickly left his conversations with the fox behind. For he was a boy, after all. A fox might like meat best but a boy preferred diamonds. Just look at them!

Now, from the sea of diamonds all the magic came. Seabirds would dive deep, gather them up in their talons and build their nests from them on the Two Pointer rocks. Diamond boats would float by, all a-glitter, the booty strapped to the decks with ropes made from his father's jute and from Min's furry pelargonium stems.
Red-haired giants would pick at the sea with enormous mattocks to prise the diamonds out, and that was bad weather. What Ron felt he had to do, and time and time again he did this over the years, was to find a way to overcome the chickenwire and plunge into the glittering sea. In his gazing, his infant surmising, sometimes sitting on the bench with his corduroy-clad legs tucked under him, other times lying on the ground around the bench, sometimes standing with his fingers in the hexagons of the wire, he built flying foxes, from wire and coat-hangers, out to King Cormorant Rock to chat to the birds there about their gleaming nests and to try to convince them to take him with them as they dived under the water and away. He dug tunnels with his mother’s weeding shovel, down, down through the honeycomb of the cliffs beneath him, past the brown soily cities of worms and the golden tessellated cities of bees, under the shoreline rocks and out into the turquoise rock pools on the beach below. He would upmerge, look about and smile, and then continue on his quest. He saw many people as he went, all of them looking for the diamonds as well. He saw Rhyll and Sid Traherne, and Leo Morris, and Papa Mahoney, and Fred Ayling, but he could not talk to them, for he always had to wear a special diving mask, to protect his eyes so he could properly see the jewels.

Deep in the currents, in the blue-grainy holes around the base of King Cormorant Rock and under the jagged slate-grey lips of Gannet Rock a hundred yards across the water to the west, he feasted his eyes on the underwater diamond valhalla. It was like visiting the inside of a benign sun, all ablaze in yellow and powerful white with fun and beauty, amidst the fish and the waving weed, the shining anemones and the clambering shy crabs and crayfish. Even the seven-gill sharks were dazzled by the jewels and somehow neutralised, and the other creatures and characters he met as he sailed about in his mask were innumerable.

At night he would mutter ‘diamonds’ in his sleep and his mother and father would wonder what it was all about. But he could never tell them. In the morning, Min would ask but he could never say. It was in another part of him. Beyond the words and the house and the mother and the father. Beyond the smell of cherries in the kitchen or the cold metal of the painted green clamps in the open shed. But they were there, the diamonds. Ever since the fox pointed out what was obvious to
him. And so the La Branca bench and the tough grass and dirt around it, within the chickenwire cage, became a type of adventure-seat, a cage of dreams. And the great thing was, as the decades rolled by, the glitter had never entirely gone. Well, not for any great length of time, anyway. It was always there, back behind events, deep within the sun and moon, the boy inside the man, first thing in the morning if the clouds allowed, sparkling on the reaches.
Chapter Nine

A BONAFIDE PRIEST

There had only been one other time, in the mad weeks after his father had died, that Ron and Min had ever discussed the prospect of selling the block, although ‘discussed’ was hardly the word. It was more that the prospect was shot at them out of the blue, by Min’s unhinged distress over her husband’s sudden death.

On a February day of high cirrus cloud and stillness, Ron’s father Len McCoy, aged fifty-seven, had fallen over in the spidery gloom of the outdoor toilet. When Ron reached him, blood was pouring out of a gash above his eye. He didn’t think for one minute that his father was dead but, in fact, it was a heart attack that had caused him to fall and the gash was merely a bright crimson decoy. Ron stood bewitched by the sight before him, until he gathered his wits and dashed inside. He and his mother negotiated the big body, cleaned Len up and placed him on the spare bed with a sheet over his cooling body, while they waited in shock for the doctor to arrive. Ron himself couldn’t see the point of the doctor, but Min at least knew that things like death had to be certified, made official. So, Dr Sheahan had arrived in a brand new two-tone Holden.

In the following strange weeks, Min’s night crying and preoccupied air at first merely annoyed Ron. Death was a fact, he wanted to tell her, there was no bringing anyone back. Even his father. But then, as slowly his own grief sifted down, forcing him to understand how irreversible the world really was, and how he would one day most likely simply keel over as his father had just done in the hugeness of things, and die, Ron began to develop a sense of the possible knots and webbings Min had caught herself in. But when she suggested in a harried fashion only weeks after the funeral that they should sell up and move, he felt for certain that she was quite deranged.

On the day after she’d brought it up, Ron was at a property out on the Dray Road, called to shoot a city farmer’s one and only working dog. He’d known the place, he had been there before as a teenager, helping his father grub an acre for a
house paddock. The dog was a clay-coloured kelpie, not at all old but it had a
tumour. It looked up into the barrel of the gun with an unsettling awareness,
almost as if it had been shot before, until Ron bit down on his cud and pulled the
trigger. An uncustomary shiver came over him as the kelpie’s frame buckled. He
took his payment, and the warm carcass in a potato sack to be thrown with a beach
stone into the Bootleg Creek, excused himself from cake and lemonade, and
headed straight out of there.

All the way home on the Dray Road, via the drop-off of the dog, unbidden
images inflicted themselves upon his mind. He saw his father doubled over the
mattock on that house paddock, with one hand pointing always at what young Ron
had to learn, the other hand jockeying the wide tongue of the mattock in the
obstreperous silver and black ground. He saw the disappointed truth in that clay
kelpie’s eye and also the ovoid beach stones marking his father’s clifftop grave. By
the time Ron was floating the ute in neutral down towards the Mangowak valley, he
had the distinct scent of formic acid in his nostrils from all the ant mounds he and
Len had disturbed on that city farmer’s house paddock long ago, and as he swung
out of the trees to head back along the riverflat, with the dune bar low but resolute
out in front of him, blocking the ocean horizon, he was certain his father would
climb out of his hessian coffin in the grave on the cliff and haunt them for the rest
of their lives. ‘He’s a monty to,’ he said to Min that night over tea. She scoffed at
such a suggestion. But Ron insisted. ‘Selling his land. Nothing would upset him
more,’ he had told her.

Crossing the dip and rise of the paddock slopes from home, on a track worn by
bullocks in the days when the Meteorological Station was first operating, Ron
would, in those days, go twice a week to the store and post office. From the elevated
vantage of their block he could view the track slung in a slanting line across the
grasses, above Tim Considine’s potato crop, as if it was a cord uniting the house
and their supplies. If the grasses were left long in summer the snakes were rife and
he’d take the path higher up and straight along the clifftop, through a colonnade of
tea-tree, and then duck in across an untended paddock of pigface and wild orchids
to get around that way to the store. In the awful weeks following his father’s death,
however, Ron took to the tea-tree colonnade rather than the open slopes when he
ventured that way, not because of the risk of snakes but because he didn’t want to be seen, in dark or daylight.

As he emerged from the tea-tree one midweek morning in early April, quite deaf in his worry to the ratcheting of wattlebirds all about and oblivious of the rabbits scurrying to either side, he caught sight of Dr Leo Morris over near the main road, heading along like himself in the sunlight for the store. Ron quickened his pace through the paddock. As he scaled the post and rail, Leo had disappeared but he figured he could already hear him inside the post office talking fifteen to the dozen with the postmaster, George Beal.

Ron hurried along and entered the post office to find Leo’s broad Welsh face beaming in profile, his silver spectacles catching what light there was in the dark-timbered postal room. Sensing Ron at the doorway, Leo turned from his conversation at the counter and halloed enthusiastically, waving a cream envelope about and cajoling Ron straight away to join him for a drink at the hotel. A wave of relief coursed through Ron’s body. He nodded warmly back and accepted the invitation.

As Leo Morris concluded his business with George Beal, Ron stepped out from under the post office awning and back into the sun to wait, entirely forgetting the supplies he’d come to buy from the store. When Leo himself emerged from the post office a few minutes later, the two of them headed off side by side down the hill along the road towards the hotel.

Dr Leo Morris, in his uniform powder-blue slacks, cream v-neck jumper and white shirt with gold crosses on its collar, chatted happily to Ron as they wandered along. He was a squat, ample man and it was he who had given Ron the Ontario pump organ years before. Ron had never forgotten the day, how they’d loaded it onto the tractor tray out the front of Bonafide View, with the sky threatening to bucket down and the ocean the colour of bluestone. He had been coveting it for months and Leo had noticed. When he finally took it home it had been the shortest day of the year, June 21, 1943.

A Doctor of Music, a Catholic priest and an unabashed epicurean, Leo Morris had semi-retired to the coast by the time of Len McCoy’s death, to spend his days bodysurfing the breakers in front of his house between writing and annotating folk
and liturgical music in his home at Bonafide View, where he gave a regular Sunday
morning mass amongst the bush rats and the sheafs of Bach and Britten and
Monteverdi. He liked to pass his afternoons drinking carafes of moselle in big
Martin Elliot’s pub, where on occasions he had been known to shout the bar, most
particularly on the days when he received his biannual royalty cheque for the
famous song ‘Click Go the Shears’, which he had overheard and written down in a
shearing shed in western New South Wales just after the war, and to which he now
claimed a small but pleasurable copyright. On the days when these royalties arrived
at the post office, Leo Morris would saunter into the hotel and lay the cheque on
the bar, for every last penny to be spent on whoever happened to be drinking there
at the time. Big Martin Elliot, standing by the taps, all six foot four inches of him,
balding and with a low-slung beer belly, would bellow ritualistically as he entered:
‘So, how many clicks of the shears have you got for us today, Your Holiness?’
Leo Morris would beam back up at his giant friend and point theatrically at the
cheque. ‘I trust our Mine Host can read by now,’ he would say, with an ironic plum
and pleasant mirth spreading all over his face.
These ‘Click Go the Shears’ afternoons had become legendary since Leo had
semi-retired, and he would regale the bar with preposterous and even ribald stories
from his time as a young priest studying at the Vatican or from his folk-song
collecting days. His stories were often littered with famous and notorious names
and peppered with exotic destinations which he had visited on his travels. Primed
by the alcohol and the loquacious, iconoclastic priest, the sessions would invariably
end with singing lasting well into the night.
This Wednesday, however, the cream envelope in Leo Morris’ hand held nothing
more interesting than an erratum to an article he’d had printed in a Melbourne
Catholic newspaper. Ron and Leo wandered together through the cypressy perfume
of the pub’s carpark and past the painted red iron of the hotel garage and the bottle
green hotel truck. They stepped from the brightness of the day into the dim light of
the bar, said hello to Martin Elliot’s black Labrador, Guts, who was in his
customary position in front of the fire, and also to the permanent lodger,
Trumpeter Carson, who was manning the taps, before taking their seats on two
stools beside the tiny hotel aquarium set in the left-hand wall.
As soon as they were seated, after ordering a stout and a moselle from Trumpeter Carson, Leo inquired about Min.

‘How’s she getting on, Ron, without your dad?’

Ron pushed his big lips forward in consideration. He took a sip. ‘Nah, not good, I don’t think, Leo,’ he said. ‘She’s not herself.’

‘Is that so?’

‘Yair, she’s not good.’

Leo’s rotund body shifted on his stool. ‘Has Rhyll paid her a visit?’

‘No, she has her hands full with Sid, I gather.’

There had been a pause then, the two of them staring at the miniature shark gliding back and forth behind the aquarium glass.

Ron said eventually: ‘We went out to Beeac the other day in the ute, to look at some Border collie pups. Billy’s on his last legs. I persuaded the mother we should get in early. Got a couple of good ones from the Tetaz farm, cheap, given their lines. That seemed to perk her up a bit. She got a bit excited. Named them straightaway.

‘Anyhow, on the way back I pulled the ute in under the ironbarks near the Telegraph Road there. We propped for a cup of tea from the Thermos. Before I know it, she’s turned away from where we were leaning on the bonnet and she’s bawling. Waving her hand, saying, “Sorry, boy”. It was crook, Leo. We got home all right in the end, the puppies cheered her up and all, but yair, it was crook. And now by her reckoning we should sell up and move.’

Leo Morris’s brow creased as he listened, but promptly as Ron fell silent the priest’s countenance brightened. Turning on his stool, he grasped Ron’s shoulder tightly in his hand, digging in with his long nails. ‘Sounds to me like I should pop over for a visit, Ron, wouldn’t you say?’

With stout foam on his large upper lip, Ron winced from the sharpness of the nails. He nodded his agreement by way of a quick and emphatic dip of the head. Leo had understood. Ron knew he would. Apart from anything else, Leo was from the city, like Min. They’d always got on like a house on fire.

Satisfied, Leo Morris loosened his grip on Ron’s shoulder and turned to Trumpeter Carson behind the bar. Trumpeter Carson was a tall, well-kept
countryman who’d been a fixture at the hotel for a decade and who also played the violin. By the time the counter lunches had come on at midday – brains and bacon, T-bone steak, beer battered garfish, rabbit goulash – Leo had persuaded Trumpeter to go and get the fiddle from his room at the back of the hotel, and to play the hungry patrons all a tune.

Amidst the aroma of hops and gravy, between pouring beers and fixing drinks, Trumpeter Carson managed to play, ‘A Daisy a Day’, ‘Oft In the Stilly Night’ and, on request, ‘Mad Jack’s Cockatoo’, a song from the Barcoo river region which Leo had notated and taught to Trumpeter not long after the lodger had first arrived in Mangowak. It had become a favourite since then, a rhythmic bush tune with a surreal and comical tale of drinking to tell. As Trumpeter Carson played, his normally neat hair falling over his forehead, his fiddle held across his chest in folk style rather than wedged up under his chin, Leo sang in his classically ornamented voice, delighting in the story and the scansion.

When big Martin Elliot returned from the banking in Minapre halfway through the song, he cut in with a purposefully raucous strine and the two personalities began sparring between their respective renditions of the song. In the course of the long verses they settled into a duet, one line from Leo in his grandiloquent warble and then its antidote from Martin Elliot, rasping like a cockatoo. By the end of the ballad, the whole bar, Ron included, was in cahoots. Even the shark behind the aquarium glass seemed transfixed by the song, not to mention Guts the black Labrador, who had got up on his feet for the first time since breakfast, drawn from the warmth of the open fire by the raucous hilarity all around him.

To Min in bed at night by kerosene light in those months after her husband’s death, the ocean seemed to punch and hound the Two Pointer rocks ceaselessly at the bottom of the cliff, no matter the weather. You could not have surprised her with how wild life could get, given that she had lived all her married days in that spot, but now she tossed and turned in what sounded like a relentless world, trying to fill her mind with chores rather than recriminations, but failing miserably.

She kept two books beside her bed: The Gift of Poetry, and her father’s Bible. In the shock of losing Len so suddenly, big Len who had wooed her with his marmorean physique, his innocent good looks and a smile that would emerge like
water out of ironstone, Min took to her two books with a searching intensity that had as much to do with her own sense of guilt as it did with the gaping emptiness of death. She would have liked to sit and talk to Rhyll Traherne but didn’t want to bother her. Sid had lost two fingers to a tomahawk only the week before and Rhyll had her work cut out nursing him. And so it was *The Book of Job* Min turned to, and Gerard Manley Hopkins, Francis Thompson, Blake, and the Anonymous ballads.

The household chores would help her during the day, the mere use of her fingers and wrists getting her through, in fact her kitchen had become a kind of penitential chapel full of the smell of cherries and citrus juice and dough, but at night in her bedroom, with an empty space beside her, conjuring up such practical solace was miserably ineffective. She knew it was hopeless but tried anyway, running her mind over the stores in the larder, what could be drummed up from a tin bucket brimming with nectarines and a pair of wild ducks hanging plucked on the old bus hook that Len had fixed on the wall in there. But nine times out of ten her mind would stall, and then splutter back to collide with her conscience and she would grope for the two books beside the hessian lamp, to figure what could bring down a hale man like that and allow her no redemption. And then of course, in the bottled light of the kitchen during the following day, as she kneaded or carved or scrubbed or stoked, or cut a pattern or darned her son’s clothes, she would reflect on the lines she had read in the ceaseless hiss of the night, with the littoral black and starlight outside.

She had loved him magnetically at first but, in the end, how could you love such a mute as that. His inability to caress was one thing but his constant requirement that she read his mind was too much. It was as if she was a mere fixture to him. He would turn over in bed and open her like a cabinet door, and with the same perfunctory air. To say that at first this came as a shock to Min would be to greatly underestimate her distress. Normally vivacious, she too became speechless in response. She was scared to resist him and unable to attempt to teach him a better way. And anyhow, she doubted, what did she know? She had no experience with men really, only of boys, and city boys were different. Added to that, she was fast becoming some kind of working creature to him around the house and land, and beasts couldn’t reason, could they?
The effect on her was like a lack of rain on the gardenia bush she’d planted when they’d built the house. She began to wilt and lose her colour, she began to curl in at the edges. Of course, whether or not Len noticed she never knew. But why else did he think she’d been through those miscarriages after Ron had been born without incident in the first flush of their love? After the fifth miscarriage she steeled, suddenly, and then picked herself up to restore her own humanity. If he wanted to love her he could jolly well learn how!

And this is what her guilt was flowing from: that last instinctive effort to survive. It was a woman’s knot and she strove to untie it. She had known what Len needed and she had refused, for nearly fifteen years. Side by side, under the same blue Warrnambool blankets. From her distance she almost admired the dignity with which he received her rejections. He didn’t whimper or force. And she was sure he wouldn’t go anywhere else to be satisfied. In the end he was a moral man, from an austere Scots family, with an unbridging carefulness, proudly set in his ways. That had been part of the attraction in the first place. She could feel the power, the calibre of it. But she was a Melbourne girl, with a gentle, romantic father. She needed the tenderness to be there, not just the wide-legged gait and the firm white shirt. Not just the country directness, the lexicon of tipping hats, winks, grunts and nods. But she only found that out too late. Well, not too late, she would admonish herself further as she lay there, for there was always Ron.

The world is charged with the grandeur of God.

It will flame out, like shining from shook foil;
It gathers to a greatness, like the ooze of oil
Crushed. Why do men then now not reck his rod?
Generations have trod, have trod, have trod;
And all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil;
And wears man’s smudge and shares man’s smell: the soil
Is bare now, nor can feet feel, being shod.

She could hear her father’s voice in the upstairs kitchen in Spensley Street, Sunshine the cockatoo finicking in the cage behind him as he said these lines to his
girls. They were swept up in his passion for the words, the love and sympathy with which he gave them to himself, and thus to them. But now the words of Gerard Manley Hopkins sank dark sounding stones deep into her soul. How could she be caught in the trap of not nourishing her husband? How could she not have found a way? He needed to be led like a dumb child into the world of communication. It would not have been an insurmountable task. She could have shown his fingers the outlines of her own. Taught him how to whisper. But she never had, and the grandeur of God, its flaming out, its searing force, had turned inward on her and was now burning her up.

What a house it was in those weeks after Len McCoy’s death! Perched there on the cliff with the swells rolling in, the mother and her son, each in their own fretting. Ron was, in fact, the last person Min would talk to, her boy could be no confessor, particularly not of a darkness which seemed to her at that time unutterably shameful.

As Ron remembered it, Father Leo Morris arrived at the McCoys’ on the Friday following their talk in the pub, armed with three bottles of Foster’s Lager. Ron was home and said a quick g’day before heading straight across the block to the open shed. Min and Leo sat down in the kitchen and took the top off the first bottle. Leo Morris did not quest to find the heart of Min’s distress; he already knew it. It was not so many years ago that Len McCoy and he had had a little talk amongst the she-oaks behind Leo’s home. So now, having left it six weeks, and having had a chat with Ron, all he did was drink with her. In his mind he wanted to paint a shine back on lovely Min McCoy’s brown eyes. He’d known what Len was like—unsophisticated was the word he’d use. Not rough as guts like some around the bush, for Len had a certain stateliness in his silence and you’d never hear him swear or anything like that, no, he was just unable to adapt and bend to circumstance. He’d married a city girl, a flower, Leo perceived, but not a wildflower. This one wouldn’t just bear the inclemencies and grow. As strong as she was she needed nurturing. But Len was from the scrub where wildflowers find a way through parched and twisted, rooty soil full of skipjack and frost. And he couldn’t adapt. Leo Morris knew it was a crazy analogy but for Len McCoy, marrying Min was like finding himself a little slice of Paris. In which he felt like a hick, tense and unloved. And
the more unloved he felt, the more silent he became.

So Leo and Min chatted over the beer. Chatted about Sid’s accident out near the Poorool road, about Rhyll, who was a natural and efficient nurse, they both agreed. They chatted about Fred Ayling coming to Len’s funeral - the first time he’d been to mass in eighteen years. Chatted about the proposed visit to Melbourne of Yehudi Menuhin and his sister Hephzibah and how superb it would be to attend the concert. Chatted about all manner of things, in a casual tone, and the beer going down easily indeed.

By midafternoon Min had taken the top off a fourth bottle, this time a Geelong Bitter which she had a few of in the ice-box, and they could just hear the strains of the pump organ which Ron was playing over in the open shed.

‘Ah, it’s a grand old world, Min,’ Leo said, ‘and the people we have in it. If only your husband had had your son’s love of natural music. You know, Min, Len was the most unmusical person I think I’ve ever met. Of course that’s no sin. It’s just a lack, I suppose. I couldn’t grub the trees that he did in his time. He’d say that was my lack. And it is. But no, Min, it has to be said, Ron got his music from you.’

‘Well, thankfully from you too, Leo. It was you who noticed. You gave him the organ, after all. For his shyness, do you remember? When he was barely a man.’

‘Yes, but his curiosity for the thing could not be ignored. He virtually willed it.’

‘Actually, Leo, I think Ron’s ear comes from my father. I’ve never played, not even a drum.’

‘Ah, your father, yes, the music may come from your father, but of course it has come via your interpolation to Ron.’

The priest took another sip, the gentle, transient light of the kitchen flashing occasionally on his crosses and in his spectacles, the navigational light from the Meteorological Station just in view through the window above the sink near the Rayburn. ‘I’ve been to symposiums about this kind of thing, Min. Ah, the mystery of the origins of music! The wellspring! The source! From which beyond does the melody come! I’ve written dissertations on it myself. But do you know what I have concluded, Min?’

‘Pray tell, Leo.’

‘My conclusion, Min McCoy, and it’s as simple as bread, is that music is a natural
medicine, no different from eucalyptus oil, a balm for the monotonous march of ordinary time. Now, I wouldn't breathe a word of it at the university, let alone at the cathedral, but I'll bet you a bottle of Bodega at Martin Elliot's hotel that you yourself would be far better off to sing and hum your way clear of your present difficulties, rather than to pray or consult the catechism. Now what do you think, Min McCoy, am I right or not?'

'Perhaps, Leo, perhaps,' Min replied, smiling fondly.

After another hour they'd managed to open a further bottle from the ice-box whilst Ron had left off playing the organ to soak the yabbies he'd caught that morning in a change of fresh water. They talked and they talked, nibbling first at a dish of peanuts Min had put out and then at cheese and biscuits. Now she spoke some more to Leo about her father's love of music rather than about her dead husband. And the priest's pale blue eyes and cheery spirit kept drawing the pleasant recollections out of her, like a fisherman freeing his line of a snag. She told him how her father used to call himself a 'born canary' and together they sang a little of 'My Canary's Got Circles Under His Eyes'. By 5 pm Ron came in with wood for the oven and the conversation turned to poetry.

'The poets encapsulate the music in mere speech, don't they, Min,' Leo was saying as Ron went out again to throw the new puppies some liver. 'There's a harp in the spirit of the words. Take Blake – did your father like Blake? Full of the spirit's hope. Oh, and Hopkins. We're proud of Hopkins in the church, Min. For speaking of the dark and quenching it with light.'

Once he got going on poetry, Leo Morris was unstoppable, but it was precisely that kind of energy that was the tonic for Min. The priest was something akin to her father but more flamboyant, more an artist than a man of the cloth. 'What are those lines again, Min?' he said. 'From "God's Grandeur"? Do you remember?'

Min placed her hand on her chin and looked skyward. Then slowly, as Leo beamed at her, she said, 'And for all this . . . nature is never spent . . .' Leo nodded enthusiastically, and joined in on the next line. 'There lives the dearest freshness deep down things . . .' they recited together. Then Leo stopped and allowed Min to continue alone, her light voice fragile with emotion but full of strong memory. 'And though the last lights off the black west went/Oh, morning, at the brown
brink eastward, springs – / Because the Holy Ghost over the bent/ World broods with warm breast and with . . .'

At this she paused and looked over at Leo, with tears surfacing in her eyes. He nodded, prompting her to finish the poem. Min took a deep sigh, and said again, ‘Because the Holy Ghost over the bent/ World broods . . . with warm breast and with ah! bright wings.’

At a quarter to six, Leo refused the offer to sit with them for a meal of yabby and beans. Half-soused after an afternoon of entertainment, and feeling his duty was done, he said his farewells and got into his car in the lowering light to go home to Bonafide View. Min waved him goodbye at the Belvedere sign, quite drunk herself and feeling a thousand times better about things. Through the conversation of that one man, time had changed from being a lean decline to seeming a little fuller again. As she walked back along the driveway quartz, she gave a quick prayer of thanks to God for Leo Morris and even after the alcohol wore off later in the evening, some of the contentment Leo had brought her remained.

She climbed into bed at a quarter past nine and noticed that for the first time in weeks she could lie reasonably still. It was no longer as if hundreds of ants were crawling all over her skin. Outside the ocean seemed even, without intent. The recriminations were still in her mind of course but as she took up The Gift of Poetry her eyes fell on the page with a different emphasis.

God’s grandeur. Leo, with his zest and wordiness and his unabashed pleasure in life, had re-opened the door on that grandeur a little way. Now she read Hopkins again, this time for his light rather than just his propensity for darkness. How had Leo put it, amongst all the things he had said that day? That’s right, she remembered. Leo Morris had said that by speaking of the darkness Gerard Manley Hopkins had quenched that darkness with light.
Once Ron was old enough to be let out of the chickenwire cage on the clifftop, he spent his time helping his father as Len McCoy enacted what he'd outlined for Mr Bolitho's pastoral lease. More interested in the rotation of the crops than making sure his sheep weren't having their tongues eaten by foxes, Len left his son to watch over the riverflat stock, setting him up in an old hut at the bottom of the Boatbuilders Track with instructions, checking in on him from time to time to make sure he hadn't fallen off the bushwood punt he loved to push along the river, or that he hadn't been snakebitten.

From the age of eight the boy was furnished with a gun, a fern-hook, a stockwhip, a black and white Border collie named Gluey, rabbit traps, and told to keep his wits about him, which is what he did. He combed the grass and river, shaping and bunching the sheep, singing out to the dog in a high voice, watching the sky for signs above the hill on the western side of the flat. Min worried herself sick, about him doing a man's job with a brain full of a child's dreams, and more particularly about him setting the savage spring-loaded teeth of the rabbit traps, which were heavy and could mangle a limb and crush through bone in the most violent fashion.

The tiny Meteorological Station schoolroom that had previously existed in Mangowak had been closed when the station's operations became largely automatic. In years gone by, at least three scientific families were resident at the station and the few children that there were from the surrounding hills and coves would traipse or ride to the small gabled school on the rivermouth side of the headland to join the scientific families in their lessons. By the time Ron was born, however, only one meteorologist lived at the station at any given time, the schoolroom became empty, and so Min worried also about his lack of an education.

On this count, Len would assure her that tending sheep had always been a job for boys and a good way for Ron to learn the ways of the world. Min knew that by
‘the ways of the world’ Len meant the way the sheep reacted to the world, to the weather as it moved across the sky, to the foibles of the birds and the rhythms of the foxes, to the budding and withering cycles of the native fruits, the conversation between moon and sun, river and ocean, that would allow him to predict the day ahead; and so she’d wander down to the valley to seek her son out at lunchtime, sitting with him on the riverbank or in the hut in colder weather, teaching him what she could as together they ate whatever food she’d brought. During these lunchtimes, Min would try to foster other kinds of knowledge in Ron, of numbers, and written-down things, of cities like the one where she had grown, of science (what little she knew of it), of history and of music.

It was difficult, however, for words were clearly not his currency at all. He’d pick at the plaiting of his whip or peer endlessly at the dun or twinkling leaves on the western hill, munching the food between his fleshy lips, seemingly uninterested. Frustrating as this was, she did not blame him but tried to tease him out, to conjure the fluency from the Mahoney side of his blood to accompany the silent knowledge of the McCoy side.

There was a poem she had in her book which together they would read, or, rather, she would read and he would stare away from, a poem she thought might resemble something of his world. Called ‘The Hermit’s Song’ she would speak it to him repeatedly during these lunchtimes on the flats, believing he might turn towards it as any child might to a story, or at the very least have it in his memory always. She would show him the spelling, the way the lines ran and ended, trying to interest him in the subject, trying to convey the fact that there was a lot even in books which he might like and even want to know about.

The poem was centuries old and constituted a hermit’s list of the difficulties and bounties a life amongst nature afforded. Min had been read the poem many times back among the cobbles and railway-clanking sounds of Clifton Hill, so far from the scenes it described. Now in an airy chant on the riverflat she’d say the words and encourage her son to insert the lines with his own local creatures, sights he’d see every day. Yes the ‘black cap’ mentioned in the poem could be a tern, the ‘hips and haws’ replaced with the white fruit of the bearded heath. The ‘oak’ the hermit lived beneath in the poem could be an ash and the geese flying over were the swans. Ron
couldn’t help but laugh at the idea of something called a ‘pignut’, but the cress the hermit ate was the same and so was the thrush, at least by name, the honey and the salmon, the trout, the skies, the summer. He told Min he’d like to see a real woodpecker and hear its tapping sound but the nearest they had was the clicking bird he’d seen climbing tree trunks in the bush. The bleating of Mr Bolitho’s flock could replace the lowing of the poem’s heifers, though, and even still he knew the sound of ‘lowing’ from the occasional dray that would come on by. But he would never agree with the hermit that wrens could be teary, nor with the idea of a gull coming inland. His father agreed it was just too strange, and nothing Min could say about the origins of the poem would explain it.

Between times, alone on the riverflat with the sheep, Ron would dutifully shoot any fox on sight and with his fishing line would cruise the river on his punt, or killick Mr Bolitho’s tiny black rowboat on a bend, breaming and hooking mullet and eels to take back to Min to cook at night, and always rotating the rabbit traps. He made his own more benign traps too, out of whippy tea-tree spars and bracken fronds and the long reeds that grew by the river. In these riggings, these lovingly snicked box and drum snares, he’d catch the myriad small marsupials that dwelt all around him: quolls, bush rats, bandicoots, possums, sugar gliders. He’d watch them closely and get to know their ways, sometimes feeding them and sometimes taunting them to watch their reaction, even going so far as setting the traps alight with the creatures inside, to witness their relationship with fire, and with fear.

Occasionally he’d catch the strangest things in his traps as well: a tawny frogmouth owl, for instance, a Cape Barren goose, a yellow-bellied water rat, and once a catlike animal he’d never heard anyone ever say a word about. Ron kept this catlike creature in the trap under the river redgums for two whole weeks, fascinated by the pale independence in its eyes and the seemingly unperturbed way it curled up in the trap, as if entirely sure it would eventually be let out. Ron set it free one morning at the Old Breheny Road bridge but christened it the ‘snoutcat’ before he did so, because of its long nose. As he raised the door of the trap the snoutcat bolted, low to the ground, across the river paddocks towards the bush on the other side. Ron never saw one again, but didn’t need to. From then on, looking up from the riverflat at the often purplish collar of the hills beyond, he would always know
it was out there, the snoutcat, a symbol of the unknowable nature of the bush, of its sureness, its indifference to people, proof of all the things that could never be proven.

He grew to know all the calls of the birds, the gang-gangs, the parrots, the owls, the groundlarks, the bellyfull cormorants, the various ducks – musk, black, teal, wood, mountain – as well as the other waterbirds. There was one bird in particular whose song he knew as well as any but which he had never seen in the act of singing. Ron called this bird the ‘tinwhistle bird’, purely because, like the snoutcat, he had no other name for it. The tinwhistle bird had a piping repetitious song: first, three notes in rapid succession, high and clear, and then three more in an identical rhythm but lower down the scale. It was like a call and answer, a conversation, and the purity of the sound would dominate the air if ever it was around.

Leo Morris observed the teenage boy closely after Albert Bolitho died and the pastoral lease was broken up when Ron was fourteen. No longer busy with shepherding and unable therefore to disappear each day into his own demesne, Leo had sensed a crowded feeling about the boy, a lostness, a need to replace the feeling of his days alone amongst the sheep and weather on the flat. He also observed a certain held-in expressiveness about him. After the Sunday masses in the music room at Bonafide View, Ron would be monosyllabic but always hovering near the priest’s harmonium and fingering the sheafs of music scattered around on every table and bench. Well, it could do no harm, Leo decided, his own days on the instrument had been shortlived anyway. He’d always preferred the precision of the piano.

And so it came to be, with a smiling wink from the priest, that Ron and his father arrived on the tractor that blue-black day during the war, to take possession of the Thomas pump organ from Ontario, Canada. Leo could see the anticipation in the boy’s crinkled brow as he drank a cup of tea with Len McCoy and talked about the family’s changed circumstances. They chatted about Len’s plans now he didn’t have an employer, about how he could rustle together a living from fencing, mending, digging and shooting, from his knowledge of the ground of the old Bolitho lease, and how newcomers would no doubt need him for similar reasons to Albert Bolitho. They talked confidently about this, and also about the war in New
Guinea, for a good half-hour. Ron sat at the table without saying a word.

It was not a crime to be silent, Leo Morris knew that, he’d never found a problem with people who felt little need to use the words the Lord had made available, no, not if one was productive and happy; but there was just this inkling the priest felt, this sense of light somehow trapped and probing, trying to seep from the soul of Len and Min’s only boy.

In the first few weeks after Leo Morris had given him the organ Ron didn’t quite know where to look. They’d agreed to put it in the shed, mainly because Len was wary of what he and Min may have to listen to. Leo had shown Ron only its rudimentary language – the scales, the concordances of the stops, the way to pick out a familiar melody in the right hand whilst droning in the bass with the left. They’d arranged for a weekly get-together to advance upon this but during the in-between times Ron would tentatively explore the potential voices of his new instrument.

It was extraordinary, as Leo had said. With certain arrangements of the stops it could sound like a highland bagpipe and yet in another combination, say with all the stops pushed in but for Principal, Clarabella and Pipe Melodia, it had the dark solemnity of an orchestral instrument. And then again, if all stops were pulled and a simple chord such as E major was played, the sound would blast out of the oak casing, ready to raise a congregation to its feet. Ron would fiddle with the combinations, finding by trial and error the sounds he enjoyed and all the while picking up smatterings of technique from Leo during the Wednesday afternoon sessions in the open shed.

As it turned out, it was the tinwhistle bird that opened the doors for Ron to the addictive pleasure he eventually found with the instrument. For two years after taking possession of the pump organ he would wait until his father was away from the shed and stumble assiduously through the rote instructions Leo had given. After these two years he could passably play a tune – the ‘23rd Psalm’, though with halting chord changes – and he would climb through arpeggios and move his fingers crablike across the keyboard in search of new scales every morning and night of his life. But without illumination. Until one day, three weeks after he had decided to abandon the ‘23rd Psalm’ in favour of the ‘Marseillaise’, he
absentmindedly began to search out the notes that the tinwhistle bird sang on the other side of the shed wall. There it was, over and over, first the three high notes and then the answer, the low notes – a dialogue, but all from the same bird.

It took him most of an afternoon, what with finding the notes and arranging the stops for the most faithful sound, as well as experimenting with accompaniment in the bass, but long after the bird itself had flown away to pipe its tune under someone else’s sill, Ron was blissfully pedalling the bellows and playing the tinwhistle bird’s tune. It was like magic. Beyond the treble clefs, the arpeggios and the fingerings, and far beyond any dutiful intent on his behalf to make Leo’s gift worthwhile for all concerned, he was playing music. His music. Well, as he’d often reasoned with himself since, the music of his world.

Over and over he played the tinwhistle bird’s tune, eventually abandoning any need for faithfulness of tone and pulling out all stops and then pushing them in. He extemporised and improvised and droned and piped the simple arrangement of notes. It was a new dimension, a gateway, and when his legs finally stilled on the bellows he felt sated in a way he never had.

His heart was full, and yet nobody knew. It was like the sea of diamonds and yet he had it under his fingertips. What else could he hear and play like that? What other things in this world could be taken and fashioned so? It was never ending, he imagined, like the halls of sparkling jewels under the surface of the sea, it was infinite like the night sky, mind boggling and simple all at once. His solace with the pump organ had begun.
Chapter Twenty-Four

**MIN AND THE SEASHELL**

Min McCoy had always thought that getting off to a good start in life was the key to her happiness but she’d never spared a thought for what might make life’s end a tolerable thing. Both her father’s and her sister’s deaths had entailed no suffering. Papa Mahoney had simply fallen asleep in the kitchen beside the cockatoo cage, never to wake up again, and Elsie had dropped stone dead from a heart attack under her pergola in Balwyn, without a moment to think. Min always presumed her bloodline would see her head off in the same way, without fuss, and without drawing anyone else into a sacrificial bother.

On the deep myrtle-beech sill of the kitchen sink window where she’d stood for untold hours over the years, there was a spearmint coloured saucer with a cake of yellow soap and a small crystal vase which she kept fresh with a flower from the garden. In between these two fixtures had always been, or so it seemed, a small coffee coloured seashell, which somewhere along the line she or Len or Ron had picked up and deposited there. In all the years Min had hardly noticed that shell but now, as her body began to fail and her lung developed a brackling wheeze along with the coughing and catarrh, for some reason or other she began to dwell on it. One evening after dinner she asked Ron if he knew when or how on earth that shell had come to be on the windowsill all this time. He shook his head, after glancing over to the sink to check that he knew exactly what shell it was she was talking about.

Min needed time to acquaint herself with her decline, time to grow familiar with death’s season as it surrounded her, and surprisingly, the coffee coloured shell had moved to the forefront of the small aids and talismans she rested on for assistance, along with her one or two books, her cup, and the memories which kept re-emerging now after lying fallow for so many years. Her life had had its illnesses and difficulties, but her enchantment with small things had never dwindled for long. But somehow she had never really noticed the shell, an extraordinary shell she now
realised, that had lain in front of her through it all.

Now, a little bit like her grandmother with her rosary, she would take the seashell up in her palm and carry it as she went about the house, or sit with it at the kitchen table or in the Papa Mahoney chair in the brighter light of the front room, and regard it.

She didn’t know anything much about shells; she knew a periwinkle from a pippy, a limpet from a cowry, an abalone from an elephant fish, the kind of information she’d picked up along the way, but that was all. The seashell from the windowsill was less than an inch wide at its base, and spiral shaped. It wound around itself in a perfect whorl, as if made by a confectioner, until at its nipple-like tip its colour vanished, leaving a bone-white but translucent nub. On close inspection, Min reflected that the reason for the body of the shell’s exact likeness to the colour of coffee was that its surface was deceptively complex – it was variegated, like the breast of the bristlebird, with dark brown dots, slightly raised, alternating in a kind of miniature latticework with the lighter brown background. This gave the shell’s colour a layered, vivifying depth, and also an ephemerality in keeping with the ocean’s currents, the mysteries from which it came.

Min liked to hold the shell and rub her thumb on its lower band where the raised dots were darkest and its texture both smooth and coarse at the same time. She could rub her thumb over that slightly knobbly surface and think of baubles hanging on strips in open doorways, or sea-buoys clumped together along the old fencelines, or the braille the nuns in the convent at Abbotsford would have liked her to learn so that she could help the blind. It was as if the rhythmic and minute unevenness of the seashell was a trigger for reflections on her life itself, with all its pocks and peaks attaining a hindsighted symmetry when viewed in her mind from her chair.

As the days of summer passed, as Ron went about his business, coming in and out the porch door with bream and crabs, tools or a gun, beer and vegetables dripping soil, she remained heavily dressed even in the heat. She gazed at the seashell’s structure and slowly began to gather a rendition of the course of her life and an acquaintance, more importantly, with her impending death. During the January days she saw how the shell spiralled in space, ascending in motion towards
its height, where its earthly appearance fell away and transformed into lucency. Gone at the tip was its coffee tone, its movement stilled, replaced by the clarifying fulfilment of the form completing itself.

Min thought it was uncanny that just when she needed it most, when she was beginning to falter, the little shell had made itself conspicuous where for decades it had merely been another object of many that the sea had jettisoned and that were lying about their home. She found she could read into it almost inexhaustibly, depicting time and herself, in the nights and days it took for the shell’s stair to arrive at its tip. She began to see the darker dots as the nights of her life and the lighter in-between ones as all her days and outward moments. As the broad whorl curled upward and became a narrower band, she noticed the darker dots lightening, which she interpreted as the pattern of her sleep, which had grown lighter and lighter the older she got, to the point that now she wasn’t sure whether she ever really slept at all. She remembered herself as a teenager in those earlier, darker dots, those nights of the broad whorl at the shell’s base, sleeping sometimes fourteen hours at a time, moaning as her father came up the stairs in his heavy apron between customers to stroke her hair and implore her to greet what was left of the day. And then she saw the prime of life in the shell’s middle band, so clearly defined and distinct from her childhood, where she married and took on adulthood. Where the shell had two small holes knocked out of it, probably from activity on the sill over the years, Min saw her father’s death and then the death of Len.

This distinction between eras in her life transformed, however, if she turned the shell ever so slowly in her fingers. Time became a continuum again and everything in life was merged on a single fluid ramp towards heaven. The first hole, the death of her father, led inexorably on then to the death of her husband, they were in the same stream as she revolved the shell; but if she held it still and looked again, it was as if she’d had three lives rather than one, three bands ascending, and everything was separate and to be held so. She saw in the shell the story not only of her life but of the nature of life itself, she saw the growing, the middle age, the penultimate stage and then the rising. The rising of which the Bible speaks. And the poets. And now the kitchen sill shell in her fingers.
The one thing Min could not make out from the shell, however, was her beginning. There was no starting point to the shell. The broad band at its base sprung from a sheer lip which turned and disappeared into the centre of its hollow underneath. So, right there, turning the shell upside down and looking back into its base, she began to see all infinity. Again and again as she peered into the hollow, all it did was make her turn the shell over, and look again at its spiralling. There was no solution, no visible source. There was an underside to it all but seemingly no first moment. Or perhaps that first moment was not hers to see. Perhaps it was her mother and father alone who could share that beginning. Or perhaps it was only God’s mystery. Either way there would be no doubt, Min thought, the seashell from the kitchen window showed that life was perfect and that the physical senses could never trace it to its ultimate source, and that therefore death, despite the doomsayers, could well be the greatest perfection of all.

Ron did not tell Min what he’d noticed missing from the woodpile and when he found the timber on the beach below he didn’t for one minute think that it was anything else but teenagers out on holiday having a bit of a night-time adventure. From time to time over the years they’d had rocks rained down on their roof at night during summer holidays, and wood from his woodpile over the cliff was just another version on the theme. He did marvel, however, at how he hadn’t been woken by the knocking of the melaleuca gate.

He knew Min was ailing. He could hear fluid sloshing about in her chest as she breathed and even when she spoke now her voice was inflected with it. Despite her age, Ron still couldn’t get over how quickly she was going downhill. The sheer speed of it. It did not seem long ago at all that he’d been holding the ladder for her as she cleaned the spouting in her dishwashing gloves. But now she spent most days sitting in the Papa Mahoney chair in the front room, wrapped up in a maroon shawl despite the January sun, which seemed to Ron particularly ferocious that year.

They’d had Christmas on their own, and happily so, with brief visits from Rhyll and Darren, Sweet William, and Nanette Burns. More and more, Min tapped her left underwrist as she coughed in her chair and Ron couldn’t remember whether Sweet William’s explanation for that mannerism had been to do with the fact that
that was where she kept her hanky or that that was where she’d worn her watch. When he asked Min about it, he knew she was not telling the truth when she said she must be getting old and had forgotten to put her watch on. Despite her loss of weight and the deterioration of her lungs, Min’s memory seemed to Ron, if anything, to be better than ever.

They shared the cooking now but Ron did most of his on the barbecue outside. He’d cook chops or bacon and eggs, or smoke an eel or a bream. He could make mashed potato but Min always had to fix a salad if they wanted that. She restricted herself to simple meals that could cook themselves and on her doctor’s instructions for the first time ever she had begun to cook spaghetti bolognese. Ron took to it with relish and one pot could last them three days. So it became a favourite, even when the temperature climbed over thirty degrees.

Through January, Dr Bernard Feast recommended that they visit him at the Colac hospital once a fortnight to drain her lung but after their first visit of the new year he said they’d better make it once a week. Although it was a simple procedure the doctor was worried about Min having to travel so much but when he questioned her, and later Ron, about her having it done by the local GP in Mangowak, he realised they wouldn’t hear of it. It wasn’t that they had anything against the doctor where they lived, it was just that they were used to Dr Feast. He was a link in a chain that fed all the way back to the days in the 1920s and ’30s when Dr Dwyer had looked after them in Minapre. Bernard Feast knew how difficult a change of doctors could be for elderly people, and that Ron was now elderly as well as his mother. He decided on balance, however, that Min should risk the travel, mainly because he knew she’d prefer it that way, given that he couldn’t get out to the house.

When Dom Khouri heard that Min was failing he offered any help he could. One Sunday he showed up at the door having arrived back in the country from a business trip only the previous day. He sat with Min and Ron in the kitchen like he had on the day they’d met and told them all about America and how glad he was to be home. When he heard that they were making weekly visits to Colac he offered to send them a driver and a car but, although it appealed in some ways to Ron, Min wouldn’t hear of it.
Dom Khouri was a good conversationalist and Min talked to him about his life, his early days back in Lebanon, and her own memories too. She could talk to him in a way that she couldn’t to her son. She could be blunt about death whereas in Ron’s presence she wouldn’t mention it at all. She even showed Dom Khouri the coffee coloured seashell. ‘I love it like a rosary,’ she told him, and he had raised his hooded eyes from the shell in his hand to hers and smiled in acknowledgment.

Dom Khouri, of course, was worried not only for Min but also for Ron, as was Dr Feast, and Sweet William, and anyone who cared about him. All Ron would say of Min’s condition when asked was that ‘she’s slipped a bit’, but that in itself, given her irrepressibility over the years, spoke volumes to those in the know. Occasionally, over the cards and stout with Sweet William, Ron would go so far as to speculate about life without her, but in his deeper self, in the Ron that slept and dreamt of diamond boats, and trod the riverbanks and beaches before light, the Ron who swooned in the songs he played on the pump organ at night, there was never going to be life without Min. It was about as likely as Martians arriving on Gannet Rock.

So their relationship remained the same as ever through her dying days, although occasionally his body would quiver with an involuntary foreboding. Min’s mind was sharp and thus in conversation no role reversal had taken place. She still cosseted him with her voice, asked his opinions as if she was asking those of the Prime Minister, wondered aloud about his health rather than her own. And still they sat, on the long summer nights, together over dinner and afterwards, talking, scanning the local rag for tidbits of interest or the country Trading Post for bargains, drinking stout and tea, Min with the shell either in her hand or in the pouch of her apron, Ron with one ear cocked to the weather outside, listening for windshifts and, occasionally now, for teenagers up to no good in the yard.

Before bed Min had pills to take, and a liquid medicine which she loathed, and Ron would help her up from where she sat, shoulder her through the swinging galley door, down the hallway to her room. He would leave her to undress herself, put on her nightie and then he’d hear her in the bathroom coughing and wheezing loudly, and then brushing her teeth and humming again between laboured breaths as she crossed back over the boards and hallway runner to her room.
He’d finish the dishes he was washing at the sink, or the tackle he was arranging, and go in and kiss her on the forehead, his lips puckering and moist and her smiling up at him with love but wheezing terribly from the exertion of getting into bed. After a time, though, her chest would settle down and she’d take up *The Gift of Poetry* or the Bible and read with the light of the bedside lamp. Midst the sound of the ocean she’d listen to her son off in the kitchen and pray for him. And she loved it when he went to the open shed and played for her. As the reedy tunes drifted across the clifftop to her ears she would believe the story the seashell told her more than anything on earth. She waited almost patiently then for the moment when her own life’s spiral would reach its fruition.
Chapter Twenty-Five

THE RUST FALLS AWAY

In the days leading up to Min’s death, Ron had noticed a cat without a bell hanging around the house. It was a small charcoal-coloured cat with a bit of the kitten still in it, and Ron was sure that it was there to play havoc with the bristlebirds. Then, on the day before Min’s condition worsened dramatically, he saw three teenage boys sniggering and furtively pointing as they walked past his driveway and then heard them calling the cat by its name.

That night, after he’d settled Min in her bed for sleep and played her ‘Bantry Bay’ on the pump organ, he went to the bathroom cupboard, took an aspirin pill out of its foil and placed it on the kitchen table next to an empty jar he got out of the low cupboard under the sink. He sat then at the table in silence, with the jar and the aspirin in front of him, listening for his mother’s breath until, at a little before midnight, he got up, went to the fridge, took out the bottle of Gellibrand milk and three-quarter filled the jar. Then he took up the aspirin and crumbled it with his fingers into the milk in the jar and shook it vigorously until he was sure its contents had merged. He stood up, placed the Gellibrand milk back in the fridge, put the jar in the pocket of his gaberdine coat, and left the house.

With his nose for reconnaissance he’d seen where the teenagers and the cat were staying and now walked down Two Pointers Way towards the house. It was half a mile east from his place, on the rise before what used to be the burn-off paddock. At the house the lights were all out but after slipping quietly down the side walkway he found a small bungalow from which he could hear music and teenage voices. He stood still by the wire fence separating the house from its neighbours, camouflaged by bottlebrush trees. He gauged that due to the music there was practically no risk.

He stepped out from the side of the house into the open backyard and made his way soundlessly to the back step. As he had presumed, the cat’s bowl was there, next to a screen door and a jumble of sandals, tennis balls and boots. Kneeling gently down he pulled out the jar from his pocket, unscrewed the lid and poured its
contents into the bowl. ‘Lap, lap, little cat,’ he said to himself under his breath and then quickly rose and made his way across the yard, up the side of the house and was gone.

Because of his late night, Ron didn’t rise from bed the next morning until seven o’clock and when he did, he found his mother breathing uncomfortably and unable to speak. She had not been out of bed now for three days and Ron was hoping that the rest would set her right but, in fact, as it now occurred to him, it was the beginning of the end. He tried to rouse her to conversation and he stroked her forehead and spoke to her but, apart from the laboured pulse of her breath, she remained still, with her eyes closed. He went to the kitchen and made some toast with jam and took it in with the hope that the smell might rouse her but the plate just sat unattended on her bedside table, beside her books and her watch where she had left it when she’d taken it off weeks ago, and the coffee coloured seashell.

Gradually, as the minutes of the morning passed and Min showed no signs of coming around, Ron began to grow bewildered. For nearly an hour between nine and ten o’clock he paced the house, opening and shutting windows, imploring his mother to open her eyes and talk to him, until he eventually burst into tears. In his distress he felt the conundrum of needing another her to help him, to tell him what to do. But there was no other Min, there was only this one, and there she lay in her uniqueness, pale as a broken wave in her bed.

Eventually, at around ten thirty, Ron decided he should calm down and ring Dr Feast at Minapre Hospital. He spoke to reception and was told that Dr Feast was on duty in Colac but when he rang there they told him he was on a rostered day off and could not be contacted. Ron tried to explain that Min was not just another patient to Dr Feast but met a stonewall of hospital protocol and there was nothing he could do. He hung up the phone. He thought of dialling 000 for emergency but just as he was ruling out the arrival of some anonymous ambulance workers an unexpected strength came over him. As he stood there at the phone table in the dim light of the hall it was as though his emotional self had suddenly stepped aside and left him only with a calm reason. He realised in an instant that he was alone, that he had a job to do, and that Min’s duty towards him was finally discharged.

He re-entered her room with a cold flannel and, sitting beside her bed, gently
touched her brow with it. Her breathing had changed now, from a halting, obfuscated wheeze to something almost imperceptible, so that he laid his head to one side on her breast from time to time, and placed his thumb and forefinger under her nose, to make sure she was still alive. He held her hand in his and spoke. He told her that he’d fixed that darned cat who was after the bristlebirds and that they were nearly out of milk so it was just as well she didn’t want her usual cups of tea. Then he told her about the woodpile and how the cat’s owners had done it but that now the cat was dead they wouldn’t be coming back. He said that Sweet William had to go to Melbourne the day before to see the specialist about his skin cancer. He called her Minnie, which he never had before, but remained unaware that he had called her by that name. He said, ‘Minnie, do you want to call Rhyll?’ and awaited no reply. It was all sinking in, and as the time passed she was a creature for whom the end was getting closer and closer.

In the middle of the afternoon, Ron was jerked from his calm attendance as Min momentarily opened her eyes and gazed at him. For an instant she looked terrified and tightened her grip on his hand and Ron was lost again. He’d never noticed any kind of fear in his mother’s eyes and he felt as if the earth had just been swallowed and that there was nothing solid at all to walk on. Then she averted her gaze and looked straight ahead at the big brown dresser against the wall in front of her bed. He followed her line of sight and found comfort in the solidity of the hulking old piece. Her breathing grew audible again and for a time she seemed to be concentrating on the dresser just so she could continue. Then she closed her eyelids and said: ‘The rust is falling. It’s going away. Look, Molly.’

At around 6 pm, as the cloud remained thick in the sky and the wind from the southwest could be heard thrumming on the open shed, Min passed away while Ron was in the bathroom refreshing her flannel. A little earlier her chain-stoking had begun and Ron had recognised what he had heard before in animals. He let go of her hand in respect as he heard it and sat on the chair beside her and prayed to Leo Morris. He prayed aloud and asked their old friend to greet her when she came, to look after her as if she was one of his own. Then he got up to refresh the flannel and when he returned, Min had gone.

She lay, still warm, with her son’s hand on her own. Her face, in the last whisper
of life, had arranged itself into a contented smile. She had worked it off, at the end, this life. As she struggled through the previous night, the living she once had clung to like a raft in grey water had become an obstacle to her movement. Her impetus was to pass on, to be released from the body’s weight and tribulations, but it wouldn’t let her go. Like a broken husk still attached by a stubborn filament she remained moored in her skin, with her chest aching, and the moisture in her lungs threatening to drown her ascension and reduce her to a hell. It was then, after hours of anguish, with her energy caught between pushing outward into breath and turning inward into the freshness of death, that she saw the rust. The coagulation of cinnabar and russet, contorting whatever it touched. All her life’s experiences, all her efforts and meetings, were just rust now growing like a parasite on what she was. She saw it clearly and knew that all she had to do was wipe it clean. Bit by bit, rusted moment by rusted moment, until all that was left was a thing pristine enough to rise and flow on, to leave the bed in which she lay, and the room, and to rise from her body until she was out in the night, far above the cliff and the house and the wind’s whitecaps, further and further, until even the Two Pointer rocks were just distant specks that she’d left behind for all time, and after all these years. Beyond the waves and stars, where there was no motherhood or wifeliness, no chatter and no sun, where all was sheer and brilliant, she went out of her life’s enclosure and into an infinite openness.

Time had ceased as a line, it was a spindle that had gathered but gathered no more.

Ron sat stunned and in awe. And, as the night fell and the room grew dense, there was no need for light. It was as if for a time he nearly went with her and all space had dissolved. There were no shapes anymore in the room. He heard nothing. He held her fingers in his hand and moved way out, beyond feeling, beyond music even. And then at around midnight he heard a bird, a heron’s guttural bark, and he felt her fingers’ warmth had gone. It came like a sting, sharp and quick, and piercing enough to shock him out of where he had gone with her and back to a desire for light.

He let her fingers fall dead and got up from the chair and moved to the wall near the door. He flicked on the switch. And then, in that brutal exposure, he
called, he let out a horrifying cry from deep in the extreme plumb of himself. His body buckled and he fell on his knees to the bedside and wept. He wept wildly, with his shoulders and with his guts, as hoarsely and as achingly as a human being can.
Chapter Twenty-Six

A CLIFFTOP BURIAL

At 5:30 am he rang Sweet William, who came straight over with his wife Eve in the dawn. Eve had only ever been in Min and Ron’s house one or two times before. When they arrived, Ron was in the garden under the peach tree, sitting on an old fish box. He watched Sweet William and Eve get out of their car and go to the porch door and knock. He was grateful that they’d come but didn’t know how to behave when all he wanted to do was to have his own mother console him. They waited at the door but then, as Sweet William began to move around the house to check the open shed, Ron got up so that he would be seen.

‘I’m very sorry, Ron,’ his friend said as they walked towards each other. Sweet William took Ron’s hand in his and with his other he clutched Ron’s shoulder tightly.

‘She had a good innings,’ Ron said. ‘Hello, Eve.’

Sweet William’s wife kissed Ron on the cheek and gave him a brief hug. ‘She’s with God now,’ Eve told the grief-stricken old son.

They went inside and sat in the kitchen and Ron showed Eve where there was an old electric kettle they could use to make the tea. No-one, at that moment, had the wherewithal to light the Rayburn.

Ron told them what he could remember of the events of the last twenty-four hours and how she looked peaceful now that she had died. As he spoke, the kitchen was brightening with the sun as it rose higher out in the day, the cupboards and walls losing their ashen tones and becoming cream and green and blue as they were. Eve, in her practical slacks and brown sleeveless jacket zipped up to the neck, had brought a carry bag of food and efficiently now sought out what she needed to make a pot of tea and arranged the cups on the table. The galley door was open. All three of them felt keenly the presence of Min down the hallway in her room.

When she’d finished pouring the tea from a tall red pot that Ron had never seen used, Eve said, ‘These bronchial things drag on for some people, Ron. It might be
best that she went so quickly in the end.'

‘It’s probably true,’ Sweet William concurred, with deep sympathy in his voice. ‘It wasn’t so long ago that she was bright as a button on her birthday, was it, Ron?’

‘Three months,’ he said.

‘Well, it was a great life,’ Eve said. And then, with her voice hushed as if Min might hear her, she said, ‘She was one in a million.’

‘No risk,’ Sweet William concurred again.

Ron allowed Eve to ring the hospital to get a message to Bernard Feast. He knew if they told Dr Feast what had happened he’d arrange the rest. By 11 am the doctor himself had arrived, offering grave condolences to Ron and verifying that Min had indeed passed on. He could see that Ron was in deep shock and told Eve to pour him a Tullamore Dew from the bottle on the kitchen mantel, which she did. As the undertakers arrived to remove Min from the house, Ron and Sweet William were in by her bed, drinking whiskey and talking quietly to Bernard Feast. Eve remained in the kitchen, where she had bothered to light the Rayburn and was making a stew, to see Ron through the next couple of days.

As the man and woman arrived with the shining chrome stretcher bed on wheels, Ron and Sweet William left Min’s side and went out into the yard to wait to see her off. Ron, who in the world of marsupials and fish was a master of death and death’s equipment, could not bear to see his mother’s body handled and placed on the trolley. When the uniforms appeared at the porch door only a few minutes later, with the stretcher in tow and Min lying upon it with a sheet now pulled over her face and black straps across her birdlike form, Sweet William put his arm around Ron’s shoulder as if to guide him, though the two of them did not move from the mown slope as the trolley bed was wheeled awkwardly down the quartz of the driveway to be taken away. Ron’s mouth remained slightly open as they watched and Sweet William had tears now running over his heavily grafted face.

Eventually they heard the ambulance start up out on the road, amidst the sounds of tourists walking happily up to the Meteorological Station. Dr Feast appeared from the porch and when he heard the tourists it rankled. He walked across to where the two old men had turned on the grass to face the ocean.

The doctor wore a navy blue blazer and a shirt and tie. His secure voice and his
formality were what Ron needed to hear. 'You know, Ron,' he said, taking up his position beside them, 'every time you’d bring her for a visit she’d brighten my day. Most people live only half the life Min led. And I don’t just mean in years. There really is great cause for you to be proud. Even in the midst of your sorrow.'

In a world that had now changed irrevocably, Bernard Feast was for Ron like a stall, a temporary reprieve, a man who understood his and his mother’s world, its protocols and practicalities, its larrikin codes and knockabout etiquettes. As he looked at Dr Feast and listened to his words, tears began to slip silently out of Ron’s eyes and down his cheeks. He tasted them on his lips and he thanked the doctor. Then he blushed and accepted Bernard Feast’s offer of a cigarette.

Min died on a Monday and, as Ron requested, a small private service was held for her in the convent out in the bush behind Mangowak on the Wednesday morning. On the day of the service, Ron was quite lost and needed to be guided all the way, from what to wear to where to sit in the church. The small band of old friends, and the children of old friends, like Darren Traherne and the Lea boys, rallied around him. He wore a black Hersch’s suit of his father’s that Eve dug out from a cupboard, a white shirt and a brown tie and he sat in the front pew with the Trahernes. The mourners consisted of those who’d attended the one hundredth birthday party but also Dot Johnstone from Birregurra, Dr Feast, Walker Lea who couldn’t be at the birthday because he was in New South Wales, Simon Karinis from Minapre, and Min’s sister’s son Billy. The priest was Father Murray, the Minapre Hospital Catholic chaplain who Min had liked.

A small group of nuns from the convent sang ‘The Lord Is My Shepherd’ from the side of the altar, as Ron had requested. Father Murray spoke not of Min’s history but briefly of what he knew of her by their conversations of recent years. Predominantly, though, he stuck to the readings, and the requiem service, leaving the shrill voices of the nuns to carry the emotional tide. Like an old hand he entirely ignored the hard crackling sound of the microphone that was pinned to his vestments and which made itself heard every time he moved.

In the walled garden of the convent after the service, Ron stood like a stranger on an island of grass near the rhododendron beds, in the public realm of his mother’s death, not knowing what to do with his hands or what to say, and unable
to cease wondering who the Molly was that Min had mentioned when last she spoke. One by one, people came over to shake his hand and share fond reminiscences about his mother.

The hearse sat for quite a time in the rose-gold parking bay next to the convent entrance, as the mourners lingered with Ron in the scented garden, waiting until they felt he was ready to move on. Bernard Feast eventually took the bewildered son’s arm and guided him not to the hearse, which Ron had refused to travel in, but to Darren Traherne’s Commodore station wagon.

Ron sat in the front passenger seat, with Darren’s sister Barbara and Rhyll in the back, as Darren eventually steered the green station wagon down the Dray Road a minute or so behind the hearse, heading back towards town.

They were silent as they drove. Ron stared through the windscreen at the pitted road ahead, at the dustclouds the hearse had raised, which were slowly settling in front of them. As they passed the little quarry on the shoulder of the road before the Mexico Bend, it had to be pointed out to Ron that Ian and Brian Birdsong, and Frank Webb their offsider, were standing motionless on the bright limestone pile nearest to the road, still with their gloves on but with their hats removed and their heads bowed in respect. And then, as the station wagon rose up onto the high bend, with the ironbark gorge falling away on their left and a solid blue ocean now visible in front of them, a young kangaroo appeared on the road and bounced on ahead of the car for what must have been nearly a mile.

On the cliff where Ron’s father had been buried, and Gluey and Bobby the Rover and the rest of the dogs, a slight easterly had harried the O’Leary gravediggers while the funeral had been taking place. They had dug deep with their shovels into the pink earth as instructed, preparing the grave for when the mourners arrived and Min would be put to rest. By the time Darren’s Commodore pulled in to the driveway, with the hearse’s satin black duco filmed in dust and already parked ahead of them near the porch, the gravediggers had gone to the hotel for lunch, and the grave lay ready.

Ron, Darren, Rhyll and Barb got out of the car and made their way through the garden. Stepping up to the graveside, Ron winced to see familiar ground exposed again and leaned sideways onto Darren as they stood and waited for the others and,
eventually, for the coffin to be carried across by the undertakers. When the small crowd had all drifted in with the priest, the coffin was brought, and was lowered with ceremonial words into the clifftop.

There was a brief pause before Rhyll Traherne stepped forward with difficulty from where she had been holding her granddaughter Barbara’s arm. With a firm-set, determined face, Rhyll began to sing:

‘Only one muscat for me
Unless I can share it with you
For the bottle is bottomless when
You come to my house, old friend

‘Only one muscat for you
Unless you can share it with me
For the bottle is happy and gay
When I come to your house to play

‘Two young ladies living green
Fast and bold as in a dream
Two young ladies there will be
And a bottle of muscat for tea.’

As she sang the last words of the old trad jazz song she’d shared so many times with Min, a slurry of tears swept over her face in the wind. She looked over the hole in the ground at Ron where he was being held up by her grandson and called out to him, crying, ‘Oh, Ronny, I’ll miss her, boy.’

The easterly wrapped around their suits and dresses and tear-wet strands of hair stuck to their chilled faces. The old lady was everything that they liked about the world, everything that they never wanted to disappear, and now she was in the ground.

Ron’s face was stark, dazed with grief as he stepped forward and threw a handful of dirt onto his mother’s coffin. Then he stepped back and looked briefly out to sea
where the water was now bruised blue-black under cloud. One by one the rest of
the mourners also stepped forward and threw some ground and offered Min their
words. And finally, when they had all paid their respects, Dr Feast and Father
Murray began to usher everyone away.
The summer sun went missing for four days following Min’s death, replaced instead by a peculiarly Victorian drop in temperature which spoke of autumn and a constant piling up of clouds out of the southwest. It was uncharacteristic of February and everyone remarked upon it, but they also agreed they felt somehow comfortable in the gloom.

They came and went from the house, bringing alcohol and food with them. Eve’s stews were replenished with more potatoes and diced beef which Noel Lea had bought from Vern the butcher over in Colac. God was never mentioned until the Friday, when Darren Traherne, a little pissed, had asked Ron out of the blue if he believed. Before the old man had a chance to feel uncomfortable, Bob Elliot had cut in and said that there was no way that anyone living could possibly know whether to believe or not, to which Rhyll had said that without a doubt Min believed in God and that for sure she had gone to the greatest piss-up any of them could imagine. That broke the awkwardness and when no-one was looking Rhyll glared at her grandson.

Darren pulled himself together and left soon after, coming back three hours later to make amends. He brought half a pot of yabbies from the Poorool dam and a magpie bream which he got Ron to help him smoke near the barbecue just outside the porch door. He didn’t mention another word about God because he knew Ron was struggling. He’d leave it for another time. He knew from conversations they’d had on their hunting trips in the dark of night that Ron was as curious as anyone else about the mysteries of death. Once when they were standing over a dead wallaby on the riverflat, Ron had said that if wallabies had a god then their heaven would be shaped like a pouch. So he’d only asked the question of Ron earlier thinking that Min’s death may have proved something like that to him. But it was stupid, he’d been too pissed. He’d sobered up now and concentrated on the fish.

For the four days that the visitors kept coming and the weather remained grey,
Ron kept unusual hours, rising at seven or eight like normal people and getting to bed when the last person had left, usually at around midnight or one o’clock. He enjoyed the company and, naturally enough, grew anxious as the night wore on and the prospect of being alone drew near. Noel and Darren both offered to camp with him for a few days but he refused, that would have been stranger again, he thought. As a concession to his grief and fear, however, he decided that he wouldn’t rise before dawn, that he would avoid time in the darkness alone. He had lived like a marsupial for all these years, gathering his food in the dusk and after, and in the dawn and before, but now in his darkest moment he reverted to the culture of human hours after all.

If he fell asleep in his mother’s bed, which he did on the morning after her death and the morning after the funeral, he would wake to the light brocading the wall above his head through the tangle of the outside trees, just as he’d seen it do when bringing in tea and toast to Min on occasions through the years. On the morning directly after her death he rose at the sight of this, as if he was in transgression, but on the Thursday after the funeral he lay there and cried, and looked at her two books on the bedside table and wondered again if Molly was his unborn sister, as he fingered the coffee coloured seashell.

With the coming of the weekend, and the crowds from the city to the coast, the weather broke and the sun showered itself all over the shoreline. The cliffs below the house were golden and fresh after the gloom, and the swell around King Cormorant and Gannet Rocks was turquoise and slick with shining bull-kelp bands. Ron woke before dawn and lay in Min’s bed but did not sleep as the light came. On the contrary, he felt black as soil with the revealing of the sun. It was too soon.

That was the day, but for a visit from Nanette Burns in the morning and Sweet William at his usual hour, that the constancy of the procession of mourning visits ceased. Next door at Dom Khouri’s he could hear the usual weekender activity but he knew from the cars in the drive that Dom himself was not there. He presumed he must have been away on business. He would’ve liked to have seen him.

With the house empty he found himself opening his mother’s dresser and wondering about her clothes. He touched her frocks and remembered how, as a
little boy, he’d watch her dress there in front of the mirror.

He went and sat in the Papa Mahoney chair in the front room. He placed his arms on the rests of the chair just as she used to do and looked back into the room, the ocean light through the windows reflecting off the honey-coloured she-oak skirting boards and door jambs. His eyes settled on the sideboard, the framed pictures and the empty dining table. It was all hers. Her things. Over the previous few days an avalanche of anecdotes had been unleashed about Min, stories which he had never before heard, funny stories, glancing memories and major recollections, in which she invariably figured as a presence akin to sunlight on water. He had noticed that for the younger generation, for the Lea boys and Darren and Barb Traherne and Nanette, his mother had become an instant point of pride during those days, almost as if they were from her as well, in the same way they were from Mangowak. Walker Lea had said to Ron that he considered it a privilege to have known her, to have heard her speak of the things she knew, to have counted as a friend a person who had lived throughout the entire previous century. Ron had also overheard Noel recalling the little things, the way she sucked her teeth sometimes as she talked, the way she said ‘By Jiminy Cricket’, when she was feeling strong about something or ‘I’ve come a cropper’ when she felt she’d made a blue. Now as he looked around the room full of her furniture, the china in the dresser, the faded floral rug of Papa Mahoney’s on the floor at his feet, it was impossible to believe that she wasn’t just out the back in the laundry, or on her knees in the garden, cursing the boneseed.

He heard a car outside and Nanette Burns calling from the door. He walked through to the kitchen and let her hug him. He’d known Nan since she was a fiery, freckle-faced little girl but there was nothing much to say, and she drove off after half an hour, leaving six huge yellow squashes on the bench beside the kitchen sink. ‘Best ever,’ Nan had said and after she’d gone Ron lit the Rayburn and boiled the life out of them. He ate them with some bread that Chris from the general store had dropped in the previous day. Then he opened a bottle of stout.

At five thirty when Sweet William arrived, the temperature had climbed to over thirty degrees and Ron was sitting on the La Branca bench on the clifftop with his cap on and his back half turned against the sea. He had an empty pony glass in his
hand and was hunched forward when Sweet William saw him as he rounded the house for the open shed.

‘Not feeling too flash, Ron,’ his old friend said to him as he approached. Ron looked up and stared into Sweet William’s eyes. He was crying, his eyes saturated in loss and vulnerability. Sweet William sat down on the seat and put his arm around him. The touch set Ron off and once again he let out an awful cry and his shoulders began to rock under the remorseless sun.
Chapter Thirty-Three

Diamond Boat at Night

Ron continued to sleep amongst the blue-green Warrnambool blankets of his mother’s bed until the scent of her faded, and faded more, and it seemed as if she was almost not there at all. Still, he slept more soundly there than in his own bed, where the sense of Min’s vanishing was too powerful to bear. As he lay down each night he felt the possibility remained that he too could slip away forever, gone with the saltspray, the stars and his mother’s lovingkindness, off into the benign dark.

Amongst the blankets he would read the local paper over and over, recognising names, making mental notes of things for sale. He’d take up Min’s Bible or The Gift of Poetry, not to read but just to hold, until sleep would beckon like a cove to enfold him. Inhaling deeply he would turn and lie facing the window and the surf, whose roar and hiss at night he knew almost as well as Min’s voice.

Some nights, however, as the mothering scent amidst the blankets faded, he couldn’t sleep at all. On such evenings he would go outside to the shed and try to play the organ but often that would only distress him more. The keys and stops had become just cold ivory and dead timber. From their combinations he could conjure no music. The tunes he knew also seemed as wooden as the oak case of the organ itself, he was incapable of anything spontaneous to take their place.

One night in this harrowed state he sat on the cypress block beside Min’s grave, to at least have the proof beside him. His father was there too, and the dogs. He watched the starlight reflected in a calm sea between King Cormorant and Gannet rocks. In the queerness of his distress and the faltering of his imagination, he began to think as if with shards of his child’s mind. The reflections of the stars on the black swell held his gaze and it was almost as if Orion’s belt itself were the three fallen buoys of some celestial craypot. He yearned to go out upon the water, to at least touch the sea of diamonds.

Huddled there on the cypress block, a blanket wrapped around him, Ron’s heart
lifted at the prospect of going out on the water, perhaps with Noel and Darren in Wally Lea’s old tinny. Maybe something would start to make sense again. It was not so much a thought that had formed in him but an instinct for shelter, for an enclosure to shield himself within a world that was his alone. The imaginary harbour of the sea of diamonds surfaced in his heart as an inexorable solution, an escape, a medicine, just as it was when he dreamt away the hours in the chickenwire cage upon the cliff as a boy.

Two nights later, despite the cold, Darren Traherne was happy and relieved when Ron knocked on his bedroom window at ten past three. As it happened, Darren had been uncomfortably awake in the aftermath of a nightmare. When he heard the familiar knock on the window he sat up and gave Ron the answering call. When he got out to the car he was told they were going out in the boat. Darren was glad to lay eyes on the old man, who’d been constantly in his thoughts. The only reason he hadn’t gone up to see him on the cliff was because he presumed he’d rather be left alone.

In the cabin of the ute, Ron looked to Darren as if he’d aged in the time since Min’s death. His cheeks were a little hollowed out, his expression drawn. He looked somehow smaller too, sitting at the steering wheel with his cap pulled low. Darren couldn’t help thinking that maybe he should have visited after all. Ron had obviously been through the wringer.

As they drove down the Stilgoes’ Hill to pick up Noel and his boat, Darren filled Ron in about what he’d been up to and made sure the old fella knew how happy he was that he’d come to get him. He told Ron he was beginning to wonder whether they’d ever go out together again, he said he was almost thinking Ron had retired. Ron seemed quite amused by that and assured him that as long as he breathed he’d never hang up the rod or the gun, and that, anyway, he was not someone anyone needed to worry about.

They turned into the Dray Road under pinpoint starlight and a quarter moon, with no wind, and before long Darren was tapping on Noel’s barn door and telling him the score. After throwing on cords and boots, Noel emerged and the two of them went straight to work hitching up the twelve-foot tinny to the towbar of Ron’s ute. Then Noel disappeared into the cupboard shed on the wall of his house and
returned with the reserve petrol and his rod and tackle bag.

‘What’s biting?’ he asked Darren, brushing away the pine needles and spider-webs, checking the boat with torches for life-jackets and flares.

‘I dunno,’ Darren replied. ‘Hasn’t said. Maybe gars.’

With the boat hitched up and the three of them in the bench seat of the ute under the Leas’ grand old pines, they were ready to go. Ron flicked the light on in the cabin and leant across the others to fetch his wireless from the glove box. He began to search through stations on the trannie in his hands. Looking across the seat from the passenger side Noel too noticed that Ron looked a bit the worse for wear. In the wonky yellow light of the ute’s cabin, the profile of Ron searching for a station in the night occurred to him as an image he could make. Perhaps he’d paint it one day. It was painful, but true, and he’d never made a picture of Ron.

Ron flicked the light off in the cabin and with talkback fighting static on the dashboard they drove out of Noel’s place, turned right where the Dray Road met the Ocean Road, and drove without seeing another car the four miles to the nearest boat ramp below Turtle Head.

Both Noel and Darren noted that Ron had no trouble backing the boat trailer down the steep ramp and onto the beach in the darkness. They jumped out then and Ron sat alone with the wireless in the car. Darren and Noel unhitched the trailer and began pushing it down the heavy sand towards the water. Ron steered the ute back up the ramp and parked it in the carpark under the scarp of cushion bush running upwards from the sea-level to the road. By the time he’d walked back down the beach through clumps of kelp the boat was floated and he was handed the rope as Darren and Noel dragged the trailer back up the sand and out of the tide.

The night ocean was flat, the tide hinged on the still point between turning. Their eyes had already adjusted to the darkness and their escape from the shore through the waves was smooth, with a minimum of whack on the bow. Darren and Ron sat on the middle bench with their coats buttoned tightly against the wind chill and Noel sat alone at the 35-horsepower Evinrude, steering them east on a course beyond the snapper holes, back along the black water towards Gannet Rock. The plan was to anchor just out from the cliff in front of Ron’s place, between the
Two Pointers, and to fish for silver trevally into the dawn.

Next to Ron on the cold tin seat, his eyes watering with the speed of the boat, Darren focused into the darkness, feeling the cold moisture of the night on his cheeks, happy that Ron had risen from his grief to come and get them at last. Behind them in the stern, Noel was thinking the water looked like black insulation plastic as they cut their way through it.

The conditions were good – a flat sea, no wind, a waxing moon – and Ron felt relieved to be on the ocean, glad in fact to be off the land with the two young men whose respect he could count on. The night was perfect for the trevally. Looking up at the wall of stars climbing out of the horizon he could tell by the clarity of their texture in the sky that the fish would be biting.

Eventually, after crossing the rough patch straight out from the Mangowak rivermouth, Noel slowed the motor. They entered the calmer waters beyond the sea-caves in the headland east of the mouth. Above the caves the little squid-shaped bulb of the navigational light blinked its ray across the water and the bushes of the clifftop were lit as it did so. Ron looked slowly back and forth from stern to bow, navigating Noel into position, and they rounded the south side of Gannet Rock and puttered east into the gloss of the tiny bay on the near side of King Cormorant Rock. Then Ron directed them due south for a minute or two until he put his hand up for Noel to cut the motor. Darren threw the anchor overboard. The boat’s position where it bobbed made a triangle pointing straight at the Southern Cross, with the King Cormorant Rock and the Gannet Rock the two points at the triangle’s base.

He knew exactly where they were in relation to the movements of the fish under the water, but it hadn’t always been so. As a boy, his father, or Darren’s grandfather Sid Traherne, if he was in the boat with them, would throw a long line with a lead attached to the end of it into the water, to read the ocean bed. The piece of lead had been dipped beforehand in a syrup tin full of mutton fat that Min had provided. When the men felt the lead reach the bottom they would haul it back up and inspect it closely. They could tell by the indentations in the grease whether they were over a reef, and what type of reef it was, or, alternatively, if sand had stuck to the lead they would know they were over sand. Ron remembered what seemed like
hours and hours of these soundings on the boat in his childhood, before any fishing would begin. As frustrated as he was at the time at not being able to just throw out a jig or a hook, he’d been grateful ever since to have had such knowledge from those early days when his father and Sid, and Wally Lea and the rest of them, were getting to know the ocean.

Noel’s tinny drifted side-on now to the shore, they were directly out off Ron’s place. If he’d still been sitting by Min’s grave back on land, Ron would have been looking straight down upon them. With the aid of the Dolphin lantern, Darren and Noel now began to prepare their rods.

The old man ran his eye over the contours of his home-cliff. Under moon and starlight alone the land itself was nothing more than a dark lump rising in the night, but with the rhythm of the navigational light shining at intervals, he could make out his own fenceline, the melaleuca gate, the top half of the southern wall of his open shed, the pines beside it, and the La Branca bench on the edge of the cliff. On the beach below, in the darkness between flashes, tiny clusters of phosphor were spreading out across the sand of the cove. It crossed his mind each time the flash resumed that he may well see the outline of a man up on the brow near his woodpile. They may even hear, he thought, the scream over the windless sea as the steel jaws of his rabbit trap bit down on the wood-thief’s flesh.

Within minutes, Darren and Noel had dropped lines, baited with cliff-worms Ron had provided, and the three men were silent. Ron didn’t fish as yet and the younger men asked no questions. They were just glad to be out there, with the ocean skin clinking peacefully on the metal drum of the boat’s hull, and the occasional falling star cascading through the night, helping them order and evaluate their dreams and desires.

So now, just as Ron had imagined, Noel’s tinny was sitting right amongst the sea of diamonds, and he felt almost relieved enough to make a wish himself at a starfall. It was as he thought. There was something full and easy inside him. Alone on the cliff of ghosts, with real estate agents pecking at him and strangers stealing his wood, with Dom Khouri’s judgement being questioned, Ron’s desire to see again what he’d conjured as a child made perfect sense. He knew it. He had had to get his feet off the ground and away from human settlement. If he could touch
these waters, for a time at least the core of his pain would be washed away.

With his two surrogate sons sitting poised with trigger fingers on their lines, Ron dipped his own fingers into the water over the side of the boat. He felt his anguish go free. Even with his head tilted back to the stars he knew now the phosphor had gathered at his fingertips and was glinting around the edges of his skin in the water, the sea of diamonds sprung to life again at his touch. He looked down to find it was true. Straightaway as he saw the phosphor his eyes shut tight and he saw the staircases descending away underwater, the shining manna-gum stairs and the banisters of red cedar, disappearing deep below the boat into the sweep of waving furrows and channels and guzzles of the sea-bed, the gutters full to overflowing with jewels in the grainy light he’d played amongst as a boy. It was all still there, no risk, at his fingertips after all: the coral halls, the glinting granite tors, the fizzing champagne light under the night-time sea.

He drifted deep, and in a running sea fissure far below, he spied that old syrup tin of mutton fat, lying on its side amidst shining diamonds and the fish. Smiling at the sight, his face tilted up again to the stars as he leant against the gunwale. There was the furniture and the pictures, with frames laden and encrusted in the sea. Once again he kicked his tiny feet and swam the great palace, the rooms flowing with opalescent shoals of sea-grape and weed and schools of bright fish, with proud bucking mako sharks shooting by, and long-forgotten tea-tree craypots and sunken encrusted sloops, all brimming with the diamonds.

He dwelt in these familiar depths and eventually when he opened his eyes to the air a star fell blazing through his new vision. A wish upmerged without thinking: for the music. To come back and soothe him. To ferry him away as it had always done. He didn’t wish for Min but for the music, without which he would be jammed, with time a trespasser in his life, and no relief from the confusion of other people. The star, as he wished upon it, blitzed the onyx sky. He watched it go, and then lifted his fingers out of the water and back into the boat.

He went to work then, with tackle and bait, in the vicinity of bliss, if it weren’t for the ordinariness of his relief. With his pen-torch he dug out what he needed from his bag, still stealing glances out over the gunwale as he did so, at the scattering phosphor.
Before long, Noel got a solid nab on his line and stood up quickly to negotiate. Darren caught Ron’s gaze, steady and smiling, his eyebrows slightly raised at the wonder of the world, and they both watched as Noel ran the hooked creature on the line out towards the King Cormorant Rock and back towards the boat, until it seemed to tire and a very large trevally came flipping into the boat.

‘There's something in the air,’ Darren told Ron, and Noel nodded silently as he killed the fish on the bread board they’d placed on the bench in the stern. A minute later, Darren had a similar bite on his line and began to reel and both of them started congratulating Ron on picking it again. His judgement and timing were second to none.

In the tin boat they remained anchored under stars in the sea of diamonds and the fish kept biting. Ron baited his rod and got in on the action as well. Every five or six minutes one of them would feel the nab and begin to work the fish towards them. They’d struck a school of trevally, as Ron thought they might. Under the veil of night, in a sea glinting with buckling bands of kelp, phosphor like fairy dust and starlight, the trevally and the diamonds seemed almost the same thing anyway.

The enormous edifice of King Cormorant Rock loomed high out of the water some sixty feet northeast between them and the land. As they fished, Ron began to speak, to tell in his slow way how he used to climb the rock as a teenager and sit up there watching the cormorants and sea-eagles surveying the horizon. Darren and Noel had never heard, neither from Ron nor from their parents, of anyone climbing one of the Two Pointers before. Ron described how the west face of King Cormorant Rock used to have a series of natural footholds close enough together to allow him to scale the height. There’d been a slip on that west face in the 1950s and ever since the rock had become unassailable.

Between bites the three of them looked up at the rock in the dark and Darren and Noel imagined what the top of it might have been like from the descriptions Ron gave. He told them how once, during the same week the Japanese had attacked Pearl Harbor in 1941, while everyone was huddled around the wireless listening to the news, he slept a whole night on the absolute top of the rock. He said that although the top of the rock was almost level with the height of the cliff where the house stood opposite, it was much windier. When they asked if he didn’t get scared
he told Darren and Noel that back then he hardly ever got chicken at all. He told them that as a teenager he had imagined a kind of bridge that could be built across the water to link the rock in the sea to the land. He had thought that he might even like to live out there, build a hut or something, but, of course, he’d known in his heart that the gales would be too strong and that, anyway, his mother wouldn’t hear of it.

In the satin dark the fish kept biting, Ron kept speaking, the enormous rock becoming a god right before their eyes. From the deep, relaxed tone of his drawling phrases Darren and Noel could have almost grasped the idea of the salty thoroughfares he’d been swimming amongst only a few moments earlier. The thought of wandering about on the top of King Cormorant Rock was almost as much a fantasy to Darren and Noel as Ron’s sea of diamonds itself.

They fished successfully for over two hours until eventually, in the smell of fish blood and petrol, they watched the horizon as moment by moment the surface of the water took on new tints and slowly a southerly breeze picked up with the rising light. Ron would have gladly remained floating in the darkness forever. He could see the morning coming quite clearly and inevitably now, and soon they were watching porpoises playing only twenty or thirty metres from the boat beside Gannet Rock. High up on both the Two Pointers, which the new light was restoring to their daylit golden colour, cormorants were beginning to take off and fly overhead in search of breakfast. Across on the headland the blink of the navigational light grew fainter and fainter until it automatically switched off in the natural light.

With the coming of the new day the trevally stopped biting and in the stern Noel gathered the twenty or so fish they had caught (amongst the trevally was a trumpeter, a tupong, a mulloway and two good snapper) and slipped them into two mesh bags. He tied them to a rowlock, where they could hang overboard to be scaled by the friction of the water as they returned in the boat.

With the sun at about twenty degrees above the horizon line and the water turning greyer by the moment, as clouds and an ever-freshening wind came to greet them from out over the headlands in the southwest, they decided to head off. Noel yanked the motor into gurgling motion and they took off around Gannet Rock and
into the wind, the bow getting a good old thumping now as the ocean flecked around them.

When it came, Ron was not alone in finding the daylight intrusive, such had been the intensity of Darren and Noel’s pleasure in the sleek bay between the rocks under nightfall. In years to come they would remember the night and, as the boat hammered its way west across the water, it was as if they were conscious of its importance already. Porpoises swam alongside on their left and on their right they could see cars now snaking along the Ocean Road, and people walking dogs on the beach. Darren recalled the nightmare he’d been having when Ron called by and thought how unexpectedly life could change its mood, just like the weather.

As they passed out in front of the Boat Creek jetty, the contentment was sinking within Ron already, no longer visible in the countenance of his face but hiding deep behind, in the now rasping wind and daylight. Strangely enough, given their success with the trevally, Darren and Noel were suddenly subdued as well. It was sad returning to shore and the daylight seemed mediocre. They passed the rivermouth at Breheny Creek and then as they turned beachwards at Turtle Head, Ron felt again the thorough emptiness of the day ahead. In the still night of the waters he had made that one wish and so it held its hope out to him now. The music. Let’s see then, he thought to himself, with that flame-lick of faith flickering again, as Wally Lea’s tinny bobbed amongst the ragged breakers near the shore.
Strange things are happening at the Grand Hotel...

Robbed of his zest for life by the absurd innovations of his local council, including knocking down the only pub in his beloved home town and roofing over a section of the creek to protect swimmers from the rain, artist Noel Lea exiles himself in the hills above Mangowak, on the southwest Victorian coast. He returns to find an unexpected destiny awaits. At a turning point in the town’s history it seems he has a crucial role to play, as the unlikely publican of an even unlikelier hotel. This is a novel about an Australian pub twenty-first-century style, where the toilets play automated Dadaist recordings, Happy Hour comes with a blessing from the Pope and the patrons’ libidos are as voracious as their thirst for the local ale. As events in the hotel take a twist that not even its inventive publican could have imagined, a longheld local mystery begins finally to unravel. Noel and his friends find themselves in uncharted territory, and, to make matters worse, the local authorities are hell-bent on closing them down.

In interviews around the time of the publication of The Grand Hotel I talked about finally having to laugh in order to stay sane in the face of the ongoing ‘lifestyle boom’ and habitat reduction occurring on the southwest coast of Victoria. If tragedy embodies the ripened fruit of dramatic intention, a farce such as The Grand Hotel is that fruit once it has fallen to the ground.

The following extracts emphasise the extemporised nature of the community response to tourism, commodification and desacralisation, where cultural elements previously thought to be incompatible, such as Dada and Australian bush humour, are united in a bioregional logic of
place. The magical realist transistor, which broadcasts the history of the
town through the dreams of Kooka the local historian, expresses a
quotidian version of the unseen, a readymade metaphysical oracle in
the anglo-indigenous sphere.

from The Grand Hotel pp 25-29

Kooka’s Bright Idea

Kooka lived just a few doors down from me, in the house he’d built for himself and
his wife, Mary, on the block where the original freshwater well was in the valley.
The house still stands today but of course Kooka’s huge historical archive of
photos, documents and sound recordings is now gone. Unlike a lot of those worthy
collector types Kooka was no wowser. Oh no, Kooka loved his grog with a
champion thirst. Traditionally he would begin his drinking day with a heartstarter
every morning at 6 am. He did this all through his working life as a builder and had
never worked a day drunk. Of course he continued the habit after his retirement
too, and when he purchased the old Grundig recorder and took to building his
local history archive with such thoroughness after Mary died, he said the
heartstarter – which usually consisted of a 7 oz glass of beer, or on holidays a flute
of Mary’s old favourite, Bodega champagne – became more essential than ever, to
‘lubricate the mind and motivate the senses’. This was a phrase Kooka loved to roll
off the tongue, having discovered it in a letter written by a labourer during the
Depression who, when writing home to his brother in Beechworth about his search
for work in the wintry southwest, had reserved all favourable comment for this
eloquent praise of the effects of the coastal home brew. The phrase had stuck with
Kooka and became a kind of mantra, not only of his pleasure in drinking but in his
history-work as well. In both capers, he said, as long as the mind is lubricated and
the senses are motivated, everything is well worth pursuing. But once you go
beyond that point, he warned, once the mind starts to rust up or become sloppy,
and the senses dulled or disorientated, it’s time to give it away, to pack up the archive, put down the pen, or simply turn your glass upside-down on the bar.

I found Kooka that day washing up in the kitchen after his lunch, his big bull kookaburra’s head bent over the sink with a typical look of intense concentration, as if he was perched on a gum branch watching for a worm. He yelled, ‘Hooray, Noel!’ as he saw me through the louvres around the side of the house, and welcomed me enthusiastically at the verandah’s sliding door, with a tea towel over his shoulder, shaking my hand with his undiminished tradesman’s grip.

From a moulting bit of lambswool behind him emerged Pippy, whom I’d left in Kooka’s safe hands while I’d been away, thinking they could both do with the company. The dog was happy enough to see me, but by the look of her swollen midriff it seemed I’d got there in the nick of time. She’d been surviving on Kooka’s famous cashew incentive scheme for sure.

After greeting the dog, and admonishing her dietician, I took the tea towel, dried as Kooka washed, and he told me I was just the man he’d been wanting to see. ‘Been looking for you everywhere. Where the bloody hell have you been?’ he said incredulously.

I told him a little of my exploits among the clefts and overhangs, though nothing of the reasons why I’d left to go out there in the first place, nor the reasons I’d come back in the end. He listened with his head aslant over the sink, his eyes fixed straight out the sink window, as if the worm he’d been watching had just turned into a tasty bush mouse. Then he asked me straight out if I’d seen the planning permit for the Wathaurong Heights development before I left. He said he’d been holding up the bar at the pub on the afternoon the permit was put up. Said he’d whipped straight out to photograph it.

I told him I had seen it and asked what he thought of the name. Kooka looked at me out the corner of his eye with a half washed china cup in his hands. Then without a word he opened his fingers and let the cup smash onto the tiled floor. It was an eloquent moment.

We finished the dishes and as he cleaned up the shattered cup with a brush and shovel he told me he’d had an idea about the Wathaurong Heights thing while I was away, an inspired idea, and he needed to run it by me. He said he was just
about to head into his archive when I arrived, and that if I liked I could join him and we could talk the whole thing over.

When Mary died, Kooka had moved out of the conjugal bed in favour of sleeping on a narrow divan in the room that now housed the archive. Since her death the manilla folders, the cardboard concertina files, the metal filing cabinets, brown paper bags, yellow A4 envelopes, old fruit boxes and bookcases had accumulated around him like a new skin. We stepped off the floral lino of Mary’s kitchen and entered the brown-carpeted archive to find stuff everywhere: papers, books, tape reels, photographs, all stacked high to the ceiling. Blu-tacked to the walls, between the piles of shelves, were unframed prints of some of the photographic archive: old shots of the stockbitten riverflat and old shots of the stockbitten cliff; a picture of the supply boat that used to anchor offshore at Tupong Gully, with the kerosene and other essentials that kept the meteorological station going; comparative shots of the burnt slopes after both the 1939 and the 1983 bushfires; shots of the rivermouth at various stages of opening and closing. There was also a glass cabinet against the wall near the divan with his cherished collections inside. As a young boy from the city billeted out with his cousins the Conebushes, Kooka had collected souvenir teaspoons, tobacco pouches and beer coasters. He always said that in those collections could be found the seeds of his historical work that came later on.

Pride of place among the pictures on display in the archive was a framed photograph of Mary, which hung on the wall under the window near his massive red cedar desk. Kooka’s interest in collecting time, as he sometimes called it, his history-work, had actually begun just before Mary got sick in the early 1980s, but it wasn’t till after she’d taken her leave that it really picked up pace. Her death had rendered him speechless. They’d been a great couple, thick as thieves, a much admired dancing pair, always publicly affectionate, and there was no doubt the history-work was a way of coping with the grief. When our old council was incorporated into the Brinbeal shire and the draconian new building regs came in, Kooka took an early retirement, hung up his tool belt, and started scouting around, photographing, interviewing and documenting the history of Mangowak pretty much full-time. Since then the sight of his maroon Brumby ute choofing along in
pursuit of living history, with its distinctive high timber canopy rigged up on the back to protect his photographic gear and the old Grundig recorder, had become a regular and reassuring sight around the place.

As we sat down at his desk, he pulled the cane blind up an inch or two to let a bit of light in. He also flicked on the orange standard lamp next to the desk and instantly a glowing pattern of swinging tassel reflections covered his chaos of documents and papers. Kooka casually picked up a black and white postcard from among the piles on the desk and handed it to me. It was a shot of the wooden bridge at Breheeny Creek, just a couple of kilometres further along the coast.

‘Rose Postcard Series number 362,’ he said as I looked at it. ‘You know old George Rose was an artist for life, Noel. Travelled round the country in his truck, darkroom in the back, taking snaps, cataloguing the vistas. He published thousands of official Rose Series postcards before he was finished. And had a fair time doing it.’

Kooka dug further among his papers until he found a white paper bag. He pulled out a ten-by-eight glossy photo with a white border and handed it to me. It was a picture of a smiling man camped under bluegums by the Minapre River. He was sitting on a director’s chair beside a campfire, with a truck in the background. On the side of the truck were the words ‘GEORGE ROSE PHOTOGRAPHIC ARTIST’.

‘Looks happy dun’ he?’ Kooka said. ‘That was 1951, as far as I can ascertain. He’d been on the road for years by then. Knew the country like a muso knows a score.’

‘Did you ever meet him?’ I asked, staring at the charismatic photo.

‘Well, no, not as such. But I remember him up at the pub here when I was a young tacker. He’d always stop in for a drink when passin’ through. His nickname was Beauty Spot. Used to get a lot of stick for havin’ such a great life. “Shouldn’t be allowed,” everyone’d say laughing. But he was well liked I’d say.’

Kooka leant over now and dug out another photo from among the chaos on his desk. This one wasn’t an old glossy, it was just an ordinary inkjet print on a piece of plain white paper. He handed it to me, smiling. It was his photo of the Wathaurong Heights planning permit.
'I dunno where to begin really, Noel,' Kooka began. ‘I suppose the problem is that the old town's gonna need a pub. And, with my rates going up to billy-o coz of the value of the house, I'm already living well beyond my means.’

I looked at him quizzically, not quite sure where he was headed.

‘I talked it over with your brother Jim and he thought it was a great joke.’

‘Thought what was a great joke?’ I asked.

‘You running a pub.’

‘Me running a . . . what?’

‘Yep, that’s right, son.’

I started laughing, out of pure confusion.

‘See?’ Kooka said.

‘See what?’ I replied.

‘Jim was right. It's a funny idea. You running a pub. But, Noel, I'm deadly serious about it.’

‘You are?’

‘Yep, deadly.’

Kooka stood up in his singlet and jeans and began to fossick in one of the big filing cabinets on the opposite wall. I sat, staring straight ahead through the small gap of window I could see under the blinds. Before long he came back and spread a waxen old shire map of the valley across the desk. He pointed with his flattened carpenter’s finger at my family property. He began to tell me how because our land was on the site of the original hotel of the town, The Grand Hotel, as it was known, it still held a much sought-after commercial zoning. He described with his finger how the grounds of the old Grand Hotel had pretty much sprawled along the riverbank, from my place to his, until it closed for business in the late 1890s.

I’d always been told the old Grand had been flooded out along with the rest of the valley buildings and that’s why the town centre had been moved back up onto the higher ground of the ridge, but Kooka now corrected that misapprehension and assured me that although the butchery and the store and the other public buildings of the time had been flooded, The Grand Hotel itself had burnt down. In a welcome conflagration, the Methodist minister from Minapre had said, in his sermon of the following week. Kooka said there was 'some kind of
shenanigans involved in why the hotel had burnt down, and despite his research it
seemed no one had ever told the story straight. That’s why it had come down to me
via folklore that The Grand had been washed away with the rest of the original
town.

‘It was a wild ol’ joint by all accounts,’ Kooka now told me, ‘and I believe
the conditions are cherry ripe for it to be so again. You’ve got the premises, I’ve got
the financials, and the town’s pretty soon gonna have its tongue literally hanging
out for it.’

Perhaps it’s the destiny of the vocational artist in a small town not to be
taken seriously, for people to think of him as an idler or a soak, and therefore as
someone perpetually only half looking for, or otherwise outright shunning, serious
work. That fact, combined with my well-cemented position in the family as the
youngest child (and therefore as someone incapable of ever maturing to full
adulthood), perhaps explains why Kooka, in cahoots with my elder brothers, had
thought it possible that with one bright swoop of enthusiasm they could change the
whole tone and calibre of my life by installing me as a novice publican in my own
house. And that I would agree to this without so much as a harrumph or an
objection.

Slowly but steadily as we sat there, Kooka began to outline his scheme, how
he would sell his house, which was now a millstone around his neck because of its
exaggerated worth on the coastal market, and with the money raised by the sale
help me fit out my house to become the town’s hotel. He himself would happily
become a permanent lodger in a room upstairs, from where he could continue his
history-work and quite contentedly see out his autumn years in good company. I
would gain much needed full employment as the licensee of the reawakened Grand
Hotel, we would both make a few quid and perform a valuable community duty by
doing so. Together we could ensure that the town still had a pub, and that the pub
remained authentic, not tricked up with watered beer, inflated prices and shoddy
gimmicks for the tourists, so that the good folk of Mangowak could continue to
relax and drink in a manner they were accustomed to.

And so then, Kooka enquired, what did I think of the plan?
My first impulse of course was to laugh. But as my mouth opened, Kooka held up his hand and assured me again that it was no lark, that he was fair dinkum, absolutely serious. This only made me want to laugh even harder and in the chequered gloom of his fibro archive I proceeded to do so. I chuckled and guffawed, waxed sarcastic about the ease with which I could fill a publican’s shoes, joked about how seamless the transformation of my ramshackle rabbit warren of an eighty-year-old home into a modern hotel would be, and how I’d always secretly hankered to live under the same roof as Kooka and his archive. I spoofed how I was at a loose end anyway, having just strolled back into town, and how good it was of my brothers to be on the lookout for my welfare and how perceptive they’d been to intuit my true ‘mine host’ vocation. I spoke of my innate talents for pouring a drink, the relish with which I would toss giant bikies off the premises and how, above all, I would enjoy the night-after-night tranquillity, the slow easy pace and gentle inconsequential quiet of not only living in, but also running, a hotel.

Kooka listened to all this without batting an eyelid. He simply stared at me and waited for me to finish, almost as if I was having some kind of regular fit. When I finally stopped speaking and my chuckling dwindled away, he was still staring at me. His big brow was lowered and his eyes were doleful.

‘Jim said he thought you might get your back up a bit,’ he offered at last.

I gave him an exasperated look, which he straightaway returned with an irrepressibly broad kookaburra smile. Three hours later, due mostly to the fuel of home-made shandies and fistfuls of peanuts, we were still in there, discussing the idea.
The Freedom Virus

That first night back in town I went to sleep in the barn thinking of the brolga, but when I woke to Pippy’s familiar yapyap the next morning all I could think about was The Grand Hotel. Kooka had painted such a picture the day before in the archive that by the time I’d left his house just before midnight, I was almost considering his proposition plausible.
He’d told me all about The Grand Hotel of yore, how the bullock drays’d come down from Corrievale and Winchelsea, do their business on the old coast and range track, and then what? Have a few snorts of course. And then a few more. Kooka had concluded that his block must have been the site of the hotel bottle dump, due to all the nineteenth-century glass he’d found lying around over the years. In a tartan shortbread tin on his desk he kept his favourite shards of that curious time-smoothed glass, which he himself said was the catalyst for the hotel becoming his number one obsession among the larger interest he had in the town’s history in general.

He’d told me about Joan Sweeney, who was the last publican at the old Grand, and what a formidable person she was. As Kooka had said, to head out on your own to these parts as a young woman back in those days was a gutsy enough choice, but to take on the running of a salty frontier pub chocked with hard-hearted bullock drivers, lawless loggers and craymen, lonely-eyed swagmen and runaway saunterers was another thing entirely. Most of those men had blood of some kind or another on their hands, some of them native blood, but by all accounts Joan Sweeney ran a tight ship and was much respected, on both sides of the ledger.

Kooka had nothing but good words to say about her; in fact, on the strength of his research, he described her as nothing less than ‘a woman of grace’. When the hotel had burnt down and the colonial police had tried to get to the bottom of exactly why, she’d walked out from among the debris and refused to cooperate. She hadn’t even bothered to wind up the licence, which explained the strange fact of its still...
being current for the absurd option of my use. She’d taken a ship to America and settled briefly in Chicago, before returning to Victoria in 1906. Years later, in the heat of the anti-conscription debates during the First World War, she had been a well-known and outspoken participant for the case against. Kooka spoke of her with great animation and reverence, and the way he saw it the idea of being Joan Sweeney’s belated successor as publican of The Grand Hotel, Mangowak, was far from a mediocre prospect. He said I’d have to have my wits about me even just to measure up.

After lying in my loft that morning musing about all this, I climbed down the ironbark ladder and made my way across the yard and into the house for my first indoor breakfast in weeks. I found four eggs in the door of the fridge and broke three of them into a skillet. Miraculously the eggs hadn’t gone off, so I tossed in some herbs from the garden, a sprinkle of local forest pepper, and was just sitting down with great anticipation to the omelette and a pot of tea when Veronica Khouri appeared through the louvres at the sunroom door with my canary, Frankie. She let herself in with Frankie in the bamboo cage. Veronica had cut off her usual long black ringlets and dyed what was left of them a vivid cinnamon colour. Her big brown eyes were shining. Frankie was dancing happily about on his perch and she was full of assurances about how comfortable and happy he’d been during his stay with her in the studio up on the cliff.

‘He didn’t mind the winds?’ I asked, gesturing for her to sit down for a cup of tea with me at the table.

‘No, not at all,’ she declared. ‘I put him on the shelf in the window on the southeast side and he’d just sing away every morning. Wouldn’t you, Frankie? And then in the afternoons I’d let him out for a while and he’d fly around a bit and shit on my work. I had to have a special Frankie-rag always at hand, just in case the cack dried and left a stain. Apart from that he was perfect company, Noel.’

I looked at Frankie in the cage where Veronica had placed it on the table and he did look a picture of health. His orange feathers had a real lustre. In a burst of self-pity I thought that both he and Pippy had perhaps been happier without me while I was away.
Veronica Khouri and I had originally met years before at art school in Melbourne. She was half Lebanese and half Argentinian, an exotic, precocious and heavily politicised star of that art school scene, whereas I was a little more inconspicuous, though I did have my moments. We didn’t set eyes on each other for years afterwards, until her wealthy father bought Ron McCoy’s land up on the Mangowak cliff opposite the Two Pointer Rocks. After that I’d bump into her every now and again when she was around but one day, a couple of years after old Ron died, she told me she was moving into town permanently. Well, this was quite a surprise. I’d followed her career over the years since we’d graduated – she had become a sculptor of some note internationally – but then, as we had stood chatting in the general store, she said she’d had enough of the travel and especially the art industry bullshit and just wanted somewhere quiet to live and work. Her father, Dom, who worshipped the ground his only daughter walked on, had agreed to build her a studio among the vegetable gardens and fruit trees he’d planted on the site of the McCoys’ old house.

At the time this was a piece of news I found disconcerting, because it required me to knit together two disparate, and up until then entirely separate, threads of my life. On the one hand there was my artistic self, and my own private imaginings, which on a day-to-day level I kept pretty much contained within the confines of my barn, where I worked. On the other hand there was the quiet, almost nondescript life I led in my home town, where I preferred to shelter that artistic self behind a more homely persona. The news that Veronica, who’d been a provocative and even intimidating presence in those earlier days at art school, and with whom back then I’d shared a passionate love of Dada and the Surrealists, was moving into my provincial little realm, and setting up creative camp on the McCoys’ old cliff, would require an interesting series of readjustments.

As I poured the tea, Veronica said her mother had seen me pass in front of their house the previous day on my way back into town along the clifftop track. She’d said I was carrying a bunch of coloured balloons. Briefly we talked about where I’d been in my time away but I kept the details hazy. I told her that I’d found the balloons on the beach but said nothing of the Reverse Pinocchio and even less about the brolga.
Then I changed the subject and we talked about how her work was progressing. She had constructed a transparent life-sized human body out of Perspex, which she was painstakingly filling with a collection of what she called ‘three-dimensional technobiographical influences’. To me it sounded like a twenty-first century version of Giuseppe Arcimboldo’s paintings, but in 3D. I was interested. I pressed her on it but got the feeling she wanted to keep her own details hazy as well. Fair enough. But then she surprised me by coming straight out and asking if I had agreed to open my house to the public as The Grand Hotel.

It seemed that Kooka’s bright idea had already been floated widely in the town while I was away. It also appeared that everyone was in favour of it. Veronica said that at first when she was told she couldn’t quite imagine me taking it on, but she was so outraged by the Wathaurong Heights development that she decided to offer any help she could.

And so, she wondered, what did I think about it all? Was I keen?

I answered with a diverting giggle and assured her that it could never happen. She must have picked up some other layer in my voice, however, because typically, in her hot-blooded way, she pounced. She demanded to know my specific objections and then, one by one, started dismissing them. To my protests that I was a hopeless businessman she assured me that Gene Sutherland’s wife, Jen, had agreed to look after the books. To my confident objection that the house was not fit to be resuscitated to occupational-health-and-safety standards she said that my brother Jim had already had a shire building inspector suss it out and that, providing certain considerations were taken care of, the house had been deemed fundamentally solid and given the potential thumbs up.

‘Phew,’ I said. ‘It seems a committee has already been set up without me. I feel ambushed.’

All the reservations I’d expressed so far, both to Kooka and now to Veronica, were of a practical nature, but it was to my more overriding objections, such as how my quiet life would be ruined and how the beloved house my grandfather had built would be plastered with huge signs advertising beer and skittles, my block mangled for car parking, etc. – in short how the whole hard-won atmosphere of my life would be ruined – that Veronica countered with her most convincing argument.
Kooka had wooed me pretty well in his archive, with tales of continuing the independent traditions of his beloved old Grand Hotel, but it was only when Veronica reminded me of the freedom virus that I began to see the whole thing as perhaps being already written in the stars.

Becoming increasingly annoyed with my deflections and objections, Veronica said, ‘You don’t have to be a meathead about it, Noel. No one’s looking for a pub like any other! Remember Kurt Schwitters, remember Hugo Ball, remember Dada and the freedom virus? Well that’s it. Let’s get infected. Isn’t it possible to please the likes of Kooka and Givva Way and the other drunkards, and do something that’s interesting as well? No one can be pissed off with you about it coz without you there’d be no pub in the town. C’mon, Noel, just see it as one big work of art.’

I said nothing. I just tucked into my omelette and jokingly rolled my eyes. A hotel as a work of art in little ol’ Mangowak? It was about as unlikely as an indoor creek. But Veronica’s mention of the Dada freedom virus had actually struck a chord. It was coincidentally just after the era of the original Grand Hotel in Mangowak when the Dada artists on the other side of the world had responded to the hellish capitalist machinery of the First World War by setting their own selves free. Free from the so-called rationalism that had produced such an in-your-face nightmare, and free from adding to the plush pile of comfortable art that seemed to serve no other purpose than to amuse the upper-class technicians of the disaster. Rather than picking up the usual instruments and singing some harmoniously predictable dirge of despair, the Dadaists had broken open European culture with an axe blow. They had declared their own war on meaning itself, and had taken the piss out of absolutely everything, particularly art. They had turned their backs on ‘quality’ and ‘tradition’ in favour of nonsense and relentless liberation. They called this burst springtime pod Dada, anti-art, the freedom virus. It was vivid, absurd, profoundly meaningless. No one had ever seen anything like it. And nothing in the art world had ever been the same since.

My own slow transformation out in the clefts and overhangs seemed suddenly to have been heading all the while to this point. A hundred years after the original festivities of Dada were unleashed, I’d been completely floored, not only by our human savaging of the planet on a global scale but also by the surreal
appropriations that were happening in the tiny little realm of my home town. I’d stumbled off into the bush like a zombie until, with the vision of the brolga, I realised I could return, but only with a light step and a heart reconfigured for laughter. I had come back not knowing where this new attitude would lead, and not needing to know either, only to find that, lo and behold, my friends and loved ones had somehow already divined an unlikely solution on my behalf: The Grand Hotel.

From down at the rivermouth I could hear the Plinth bells beginning to chime in the sea breeze. I sipped my tea. It would be my pub after all, on the site of the old Grand Hotel and in my grandfather’s house. I could do what I liked. There were no rules about what beer you had to serve, what pictures you had to have on the walls, and surely it wasn’t compulsory that every publican turn into a pot-bellied Sky-channel addict!

As I chewed on my omelette, a spicy burst of Vietnamese mint exploded in my mouth. My brain started to buzz with excitement. My skin began to tingle. Two definite symptoms of the freedom virus. But I said nothing. Across the table Veronica was peering at me ferociously, in a vain attempt to read my mind. Eventually I looked across at her and winked. I put down my knife and fork, leant across the table and unhitched Frankie’s birdcage door. He flew straight out and joyfully began to circle the golden cypress ceiling of what would shortly become the main bar of The Grand Hotel.
The Fire Still Burns

After Veronica left, I spent the rest of the day moving about the house, in quite a welter of excitement as I tried to imagine the details of its transformation. The house had many rooms, both upstairs and down, small pokey rooms for the most part, built by my grandfather back in the days when northern hemisphere architecture still ruled Australian houses. Upstairs, though, my mum’s old sewing room was the major exception, with its high pitched ceiling and large windows facing both north and south.

Originally the room was intended as a study for my papa when he retired from the meteorological station, but as he never did retire the room was never finished. Its floor was never polished, its walls never plastered, the pitched ceiling remained unlined and it still had that lovely astringent smell of open raw timber. Eventually, when we were kids, Mum took it over as a place to sew at night. Climbing the stairs and entering the room in the middle of the afternoon, listening to the familiar warpy music of my feet on its timbers, in my mind I’d already assigned that one cavernous and unfinished space to Kooka and his archive.

By nightfall I found myself still sitting on the wicker chair by the single bed in The Sewing Room, quite dumbstruck by the realisation that Kooka’s idea of continuing in the tradition of the original Grand Hotel and Veronica’s notion of reviving the Dada freedom virus were not entirely incompatible. This wasn’t so much a case of opposites attracting as the desire for freedom to unify all things. As a result my brain started flooding with ideas for the new establishment, ideas which I would only realise later were completely and unwittingly at the service of that freedom. Duchamp the Talking Urinal, which turned out to be the first great hit of The Grand Hotel, was among the initial deluge of inspirations I had while sitting up there in The Sewing Room, but as the ideas kept coming I quickly realised that the logistics of everything would have to be discussed, that I would need a lot of canny practical help to bring it all to fruition. By the time I went back down the
stairs and out to the barn after dark, I’d decided to call the first of a series of meetings to get the ball rolling.

I was plain exhausted from all the excitement but as soon as my head hit the pillow the bells on the Plinths down at the rivermouth began clanging away in the southerly and I couldn’t sleep. Oscar had obviously gone out on the tear and forgotten to tie them down. The dingdong-clackety-clang travelled across the sedge and tea tree and right on up the riverflat. Were the bells ringing for the end of the world? I wasn’t sure. But I did know there was no way anyone could sleep with the racket.

Eventually I put on some clothes, climbed out of my loft and walked to the rivermouth with a surfboard, rope, and occy straps, intending to tie the bells down myself. When I got to the water, however, Givva Way was already halfway across to the bells in his canoe. I stood watching in the moonlight as Givva climbed up onto each of the three Plinths and manhandled the bells. When finally he’d paddled from Plinth to Plinth and the last bell had fallen silent, the whole riverflat seemed to let out one huge sigh of relief.

I couldn’t help but giggle as curly-headed Givva, with paint flakes in his hair from the long days swabbing house-sides, cursed and swore and plashed his paddle back towards the shore. When he finally got to the bank, I could see he was still in his pyjamas. He noticed me standing there with the surfboard under my arm and grunted. I said g’day and he let out a kind of ‘Bah!’ sound. Then, as he dragged his black canoe up out of the riversludge towards its hiding place in the bearded heath, he looked at me and said, ‘Fuckin’ world’s gone mad, Noel. Fuckin’ cunts.’ Then he stormed off the beach, stumbled across the road and disappeared into his front garden.

It was too good an opportunity to miss. First thing the next morning I grabbed some charcoal from the open fire and made a sketch of Givva grappling with the bells on the inlet in his pyjamas. Around the base of the glowing Plinths I added piranhas snapping and agitating the water. In the sky great vultures loomed and swooped below the moon. I photocopied it eight times at the post office and sent them out as invitations to a meeting regarding ‘THE REAWAKENING OF THE GRAND HOTEL (THE FIRE STILL BURNS!)’. I sent them to my brother
Jim and Oscar, Veronica Khouri, Nan Burns, Darren Traherne, Ash Bowen, Kooka, and my old mate from the banks of the Barroworn, Gene Sutherland.
Duchamp the Talking Urinal

Once the bar was fitted out and a coolroom added in the loamy old space between the side wall of the house and the Dray Road hedge, it was time for Veronica and me to instigate our first creative flourish: Duchamp the Talking Urinal.

All those years ago when we were studying in Melbourne, Marcel Duchamp and the rest of the Dada gang had represented a creative spark that could defy the fads and fashions and never fade. Their attitude to making art had been so free and radical, so anti-everything and yet at the same time so inspired and full of life, that it remained fresh nearly a hundred years later. Despite their signature air of abundance and colour their great trick was actually one of renunciation and as such had something in common with the sages and hermits of old. By renouncing not only the world of capitalism but also the world of ‘Art’, the Dadaists had refreshed all the channels by which creative inspiration could come to them. They had made their spirits receptive again by casting all outmoded categories to the wind. In the end, rather than dusting off the furniture in the galleries and parlours of Europe they actually set fire to it and kept themselves warm by the blaze.

Relishing our time in the college studios as much as we did, like a lot of art students Veronica and I shared a particular dread of the written component of our course. Apart from anything else it seemed like such a waste of time to be writing cold sentences when we could be getting down to tin tacks with our own tactile inspirations in the studio itself.

So one day, near the end of our second year, when a deadline was looming for an essay concerning twentieth-century art movements, we had the brainwave to combine the writing of a piece on Dada with the creation of an actual readymade work of art. On an old chest of drawers we found abandoned in the back lane behind a Collingwood terrace house, we applied a thick layer of cadmium-red paint and then proceeded to write a joint essay all over it, about the different ways Dada
had evolved in the various cities of Europe, and New York, during the years of the
First World War and immediately afterwards. We covered the top, back, sides, and
even the underneath of this chest of drawers with our colourful script, inserting
tiny portraits of some of our favourite Dada artists in among the text, as well as
miniature renditions of some of the most famous Dada readymades, including the
most notorious of them all, Duchamp’s Fountain, which famously consisted of a
toilet bowl turned on its end, exhibited in the 1917 Society of Independent Artists
show in New York under the name R. Mutt.

In the centre of each of the five drawers of the chest, between the simple art-deco
steel handles, we constructed the name of five different Dada cities of significance
from a mixture of rusty garden-rake teeth, old paint-brush handles, broken-up
scissors, bird feathers and pipe cleaners. The cities we selected were Zurich,

When you opened the drawers (being extra careful not to cut your hands on the
dangerous names of the Dada cities), you would find a vivid riot of information
about the exponents in each city, written and drawn onto the original flypaper
inside.

The top drawer was of course the Zurich drawer, the birthplace of Dada, and its
contents focused on Hugo Ball, Emmy Hennings, Hans Arp and Tristan Tzara, and
the amazing groundbreaking performances that took place in the Cabaret Voltaire
in 1916. The Hanover drawer was next, consisting largely of a loving and
appropriately nonsensical ode to the greatest collage artist who ever lived, Kurt
Schwitters. The Cologne drawer underneath that explored the connections between
Dada and Surrealism through the junk-work of artists such as Max Ernst and
Johannes Baargeld. The New York drawer was all about Duchamp’s Fountain and
the paintings of that relentless Italian, Francis Picabia, while the Paris drawer,
which was at the bottom of the chest, told the obscure and extraordinary story of
my personal favourite of the Dada artists, Arthur Cravan.

As much as I’d been enthralled by the goings on at the Cabaret Voltaire, the po-
faced ironies of Duchamp and the joyous assemblages of Schwitters, the story of
Arthur Cravan’s freakish life had a physical reality to it that connected with me
beyond the world of ideas and art. Cravan was not only a major Dada artist but
amazingly he was also the heavyweight boxing champion of France and had actually fought against the great American Jack Johnson! Added to that he was Oscar Wilde’s nephew. Cravan’s crowning glory, however, was his death, which in all probability was by his own hand given that he sailed off the Mexican coast in a tiny boat, into waters known to be thoroughly shark infested, and was never seen again.

As a country boy studying in the city, I related to the contrast between Cravan’s artistic creativity and his intensely physical life. The boxing, the sailing, even just the enormous size of the man seemed to set him apart as someone from outside the square. He was raw, unavoidably physical, and unlike his famous uncle was only ever urbane when he chose to be. I remember spending hours lovingly attending to the drawer in his honour, writing out long enthusiastic quotes from his magazine Maintenant, which ran off the flypaper and up the sides of the bottom drawer, interspersed with small portraits of the bare-chested Cravan shaping up to the great Jack Johnson in his baggy boxing shorts and sailing off into the Pacific Ocean with sharks snapping at his boat’s timbers. I spent hours making a large heading in Lissitzky-style block type, announcing that the great Arthur Cravan was in fact still alive and living in Australia. Rumours had abounded in Dada circles ever since he disappeared that he was still alive and kicking, and living under pseudonyms in New York or Berlin. Some had even gone so far as to claim that his enigmatic life continued even now, and was some miraculously defiant triumph of art over life, the ultimate rule-breaker, the greatest living Dada readymade of them all.

As late as 1987, a full seventy years after the Dada freedom virus was first unleashed in Zurich, the chest of drawers Veronica and I made caused quite a ruckus in the supposedly progressive art school on St Kilda Road in Melbourne. Of course all our friends thought our ‘readymade essay’ was inspired, but our immediate supervisor made the strange decision to refrain from marking it, thereby disqualifying us from that aspect of the course and jeopardising our results overall. In her typical style Veronica complained loudly about this and eventually our teacher was overruled by none other than the director of the college. We were given top marks for our ‘thorough and felt understanding of the spirit of the Dada movement’. I’ll never forget those words.
Not surprisingly this tiny scandal, and our ultimate victory, put a hot blast of wind in our sails, and for a time we felt self-initiated as members of the international Dada clan. We believed that we’d experienced our very own bonafide Dada moment, not just as voyeurs or mere students but as actual exponents, and looking back, in a small way, I suppose we had.

But now, after all those years, we were about to experience another Dada moment, and this time on a larger scale, outside the protection of an art institution, and supposedly as mature, fully grown adults. We were not in Paris or New York, or in Zurich, Hanover or Cologne, or even Sydney or Melbourne, but down south in the salty sticks. Understandably we were both incredibly excited and a little nervous about what was ahead.

Our idea for ‘Duchamp’ was that the urinal would talk when the piss hit the tin. And the words it would say would let it be known that, among other things, this was a hotel that did not suffer fools. In time out between drinks, between ravings and games, between drowning sorrows or arguments, the male patrons of The Grand Hotel would stand side by side to relieve their bladders to a soundtrack of the follies of the human world around them. There would be a talking-urinal audio archive, which anyone could contribute to, the only proviso being that the contribution had to in some way embody the effervescence of the Dada spirit. I’d already assembled a few samples to give everyone the idea and get the ball rolling, and on the day that Veronica’s friend Seb from Bells & Whistles came to install the sensors and wire the room, I used one of my favourite items, ‘The Irridex’, for the demonstration.

‘The Irridex’ was a verbatim extract from the two-inch-thick annual Tourism Management Manual, and I’d had Kooka read it aloud into his old Grundig recorder. In a chapter of the manual dedicated to ‘local disenchantment with tourism operations’ and ‘backstage lifestyles’, a five-stage graph called ‘The Irridex’ is shown, to illustrate the process by which aspiring tourism operators could overcome local obstacles. It was explained in the manual that the word ‘Irridex’ was simply shorthand for ‘Index of Local Irritation By Tourism’.

In his newsreely reading voice, Kooka had recited ‘The Irridex’ into the Grundig, which Seb from Bells & Whistles then transferred onto a digital loop that was
hooked up to the sensors behind the urinal surface and could conceivably run for
days on end. As Seb knelt by his equipment and gave the thumbs up, myself and
Gene pulled out our willies and began to piss.
Voila! There it was:

The Index of Local Irritation By Tourism
or, put simply, THE IRRIDEX
THE IRRIDEX Stage One – EUPHORIA Tourists provide good company and
good monetary returns for the local community.
THE IRRIDEX Stage Two – APATHY The flow becomes larger, tourists are taken
for granted, interactions become formal and commercial.
THE IRRIDEX Stage Three – IRRITATION Irritation is at the heart of the Irridex.
THE IRRIDEX Stage Four – ANTAGONISM Social, cultural, and environmental
carrying capacities of the destination are exceeded.
THE IRRIDEX Stage Five – RESIGNATION Resignation sets in. Residents realise
they must adapt to a drastically altered community setting.

I’ve got to admit that right there and then you could’ve read the phone book onto
the loop and it would’ve been funny, just from the crazy buzz of getting Duchamp
to work. Big Gene’s eyes were popping as he pissed, and he kept shaking his head
in wonder. Eventually, when we zipped up, Seb himself couldn’t resist having a go
just so we could hear it again. He kept nodding and smiling as his bright-yellow
stream re-triggered ‘The Irridex’. As he stepped down, he said he was quite happy
with the technical quality but thought the volume of the loop could be raised. He
pointed out that, given it was a unisex toilet, the loop had to be loud enough for
the women to hear it clearly from the cubicles. ‘Otherwise,’ he said, with an
effeminate flourish, ‘all that eloquence will just be wasted on the men.’
That night, when the usual visitors came round to continue sampling the beers,
Duchamp the Talking Urinal was a big hit. Everyone kept heading off through the
sunroom to try it again, and at one stage Oscar, Nan, Veronica, Darren, Ash and
his wife, Vita, were all in there drinking in the toilet, while Gene and I were alone
with Frankie in the new bar, giggling and dipping our fingers into the peanuts.
The Lazy Tenor

For the life of me I couldn’t work out who it was that The Blonde Maria had set her sexual sights on, and I wasn’t completely sure whether or not I cared. But only a week or so after her groaning confession in the sunroom, a week in which Sergeant Greg Beer made not two but three separate inspections of the premises (apparently he’d had complaints about the noise from a couple of kangaroos down on the riverflat), a strapping visitor in a bottle-green suede coat, who was to have a romantic and a cataclysmic influence on both Maria and the destiny of the hotel, turned up from the city. I took one look at him and was sure her pent-up frustration would be cured.

When I say this was a visitor from the city, that is not exactly true. In fact Louis Daley, or The Lazy Tenor, as he came to be known to us, was born and bred in a broken-down scrubland of central Victoria that to this day still goes by the name of Blokey Hollow. He was patient with his parents and brothers on the windridden family farm but as soon as it was physically and linguistically possible he had fled, tripping over tractor parts and shingleback lizards as he went, in search of, to quote the man himself, ‘whatever the fuck was on offer in the big smoke’.

His departure from Blokey Hollow had subsequently set many adventures in train. Not only that, he had managed to find himself a few good square meals in his travels as well, which had seen him grow from the malnourished rag of thistledown he was when he left the crumbly asbestos home of his childhood into a six-foot-four, broad-shouldered, honey-voiced exemplar of the male species.

Louis Daley’s arrival in The Grand Hotel was greeted with warm aplomb, for not only did he have a twinkle in his royal-blue eyes but he also announced that news of the good cheer and virus-like freedom of The Grand had begun to spread.

‘So,’ bellowed the new arrival, heaving a tattered red Adidas sports bag onto the bar, ‘this then is the famous Grand Hotel.’

Darren Traherne, from where he stood at the sink twisting dirty beer glasses onto an upturned bottlebrush, looked at him querulously and said, ‘Famous? I dunno about that, mate. We’ve only been open five weeks.’
‘Well you’re quick workers then,’ said Big Lou Daley.

Immediately sensing a colourful new ingredient for his archive, Kooka hit the record button on the Grundig where it was propped up at the other end of the bar. He plugged in a microphone and ran the lead down along the floor ashtrays until the mic itself was lying on the bar right under the big man’s nose.

‘Go on?’ said the old-timer.

‘Oh, God, yeah,’ continued our new guest, glancing down at the microphone and rising to the occasion. ‘I had two different floozies going on to me about it the other night in Melbourne. They had big raps on this place, though they did admit it was a tad unusual. But that’s what got me interested. I gathered it was in a nice quiet spot on the coast and had cheap accommodation. And so, I said to myself, Lou, your shaggin’ days are over, it’s time to write your life story. So here I am. I’ve got this bloody crappy laptop in this here bag, I’m cashed up, and I’m here to knuckle down. By the way, I couldn’t get a drink could I, mate? Thirsty work that bloody highway.’

Darren poured Louis Daley a nice crisp Dancing Brolga, and with barely a ‘here’s health’ Lou wolfed it down. ‘Aah,’ he burped. ‘That’s better. So then, have you got a spare room? I’ll pay up front. I’ll be here for as long as it takes me to write the book.’

‘How interesting,’ said Kooka, beside him. ‘You’re a writer are you, big fella?’

Lou Daley just laughed, running an enormous hand over his face and through his bright red hair. ‘Who me? A writer?’ he scoffed. ‘No fear. But I reckon with the things I’ve seen, and particularly the ladies I’ve got to know over the years, I’ve got some kind of blockbuster in me for sure. But no, mate, I’m just a mechanic, if the truth be known.’

He looked around the room with a big grin on his face, then he leant down towards the microphone and added, ‘Specialising in ladies’ parts.’

Standing up straight again, he waved his hand dismissively. ‘Nah, I love a good time, good music, and well yeah, life’s been kind enough to me that I reckon I could tell a few stories. Give a few sad-sacks a clue. Anyway, my name’s Lou Daley. Some people call me Big Lou, others call me Louie the Lip, but those who know me
well, they call me Lazy.’ At this he opened his mouth wide and let out a huge narcissistic guffaw, slapping his palm down on the bar mat. ‘Hey?’ he said through tears of mirth. ‘Those who know me call me Lazy. Hey? If only it were true.’

This surprising new guest looked to be in his late thirties, and the old green suede jacket he wore looked like it had accompanied him on most of his escapades. His arrival gave the bar an unexpected charge, so much so that for the first time Happy Hour was technology free that night. Once he’d established that a room was available, Louis Daley propped up the bar for a good two hours, telling anyone who did or didn’t want to listen about the book he was going to write.

‘I needed somewhere real quiet, but somewhere I could get a good feed, and a decent drink. Coz this is gonna be a flat-out masterpiece this. It’s gonna take some doin’.’

Nan had arrived for her evening shift still wearing a pair of farm overalls, and she and Darren were working the bar. By the look on her face I could see she was taking this new guest with a grain of salt. ‘So has this “masterpiece” got a title yet?’ she asked Louis Daley, pouring him another drink.


On two separate occasions on that evening of The Lazy Tenor’s arrival I was taken aside with conciliatory gestures for ‘a bit of a chat’. Firstly by Veronica. She nabbed me upstairs while I was making up Room One for our new guest. She demanded some answers.

‘You’re not going to let that big idiot stay here are you, Noel?’

‘Well, what else am I meant to do? I’ve told you, Ronnie, any pub of mine has to have open doors.’

‘But he’s gross! What a pig! He’s in the bar now telling the whole world about his sexual conquests back in Melbourne. “The Tradesman’s Entrance”? He’s a sick mind.’

I quietly puffed up the pillows of The Lazy Tenor’s bed to be – a white cast-iron cot from the long defunct Birregurra Hospital, where my aunt had been a matron. I flicked on the bedside lamp to make sure it was still working, then simply
shrugged my shoulders. It wasn’t much of an answer but what could I do? Our new guest had come a long way; I could hardly just throw him out on the spot.

‘Look,’ I said, ‘he’s probably just a bit excited to be out of town. Let’s see if he settles down a bit.’

She looked at me dubiously.

‘But in the meantime,’ I continued, ‘don’t forget Arthur Cravan, the Dada boxer. He was a complete oaf probably, but he was a free agent. He got thrown out of just about every joint he entered didn’t he? And what for? Just for being a different ingredient in the pot. Maybe this red-headed fella’s a bit like that.’

‘I think you’re being a bit optimistic there, Noel.’

‘Maybe so,’ I replied, ‘but I’m not ruling anything out.’

Later on that night at around ten o’clock I was ushered in to stand in front of Duchamp with Joan Sutherland. As our genial barman unzipped his Yakkas, he told me he was ‘a little concerned’ about our new guest. ‘It’s just Jen and the kids, Noely,’ he began. ‘I can’t have Dylan and Dougie in the bar with a fella carrying on like that. He was just telling the whole world how his book’s gonna begin with him shagging some chemist girl who’d come to his garage to have her car looked at. He reckons he got into the front seat alongside her and then his mate hit the hoist button and up they went. The two of them were up there near the ceiling, rocking her little Hyundai for hours. But he went into too much detail, Noel. I told him to leave off, I tried to be nice, suggested he keep the juicy bits for the book, but Givva and a couple of others were encouraging him. And Kooka, the filthy old mongrel, was recording the lot. I had to send Jen and the kids home. I don’t want to tell you what to do or anything in your own pub, but I reckon you’ll have to send him packing. That’s if it continues of course.’

Because we were standing right where we were, I decided to join Joan and empty my bladder. Before I could reply to his concern, the loop on Duchamp the Talking Pissoir was doing it for me:

The Lifestyle Republic
Democracy means freedom. Freedom to follow your dreams, to speak out on issues that concern you, to laugh and cry with loved ones in
your own cherished home. Here at Rockpool Interiors (www.rockpoolinteriors.com) we’re democrats through and through. Come in and see our newly imported panoply of antique voyeuse and shepherdess chairs, hand-picked from the flea markets of France, the home of style and liberty. Or what about our range of elite bedding ensembles, complete with scintillating free-to-speak customer testimonials? Come on, Australia, enjoy your right as citizens of the lifestyle republic. Come in and feel the freedom. At Rockpool Interiors there’s no horizon when it comes to comfort.

The loop had been put in Duchamp to take the piss out of the lifestyle set but now, as Joan and I shook ourselves down, the word ‘freedom’ was all I could hear.

The night drifted on like a cloud in the sky or, to be more precise, with the dogged persistence of a bad rumour. Somehow, for the rest of the evening, the usually crisp and salient tempo that could be found in The Grand was sullied. Kooka and Givva Way stayed perched at the bar listening to The Lazy Tenor’s stories. (Kooka, of course, could almost be excused due to his vocational ulterior motive. Givva, as usual, had no excuse.) Everyone else hunkered in the corners and pokey shadows of the building. Many clustered sulkily in The Horse Room playing perfunctory games of pool, some nestled disheartened on the verandah and listened to The Blonde Maria and The Connotations sarcastically mocking early Bob Dylan covers (the chanteuse had taken my advice about her singing political songs, but with a grain of salt. Bob Dylan was God to a lot of the old surfi types, especially to the boys in the band, and she was really digging the knife in), while others, like Veronica and Nan for instance, took the opportunity to go home early. They weren’t needed, it was true; the amount of beer consumed that night in The Grand was only a fraction of the usual, but I for one was disappointed at the small town conservatism or, dare I say it, the wider-world political correctness that this big red-headed stranger had triggered merely by turning up and announcing himself. Sure he was loud, sure he was an earbasher and yeah, he had a dirty mouth, but we weren’t at a meeting of the Presbyterian Quilters Guild! This was a hotel after all.
But what a difference a good sleep can make, especially when there’s melaleuca and music in the air. On the day after The Lazy Tenor’s arrival I woke up to the blessed and freakish delivery of an authentic bit of local spring weather. I’d been dreaming of the sap and the sea. In days gone by my brothers and I would help our parents harvest melaleuca oil and mussels on mornings rich with the scent of flaky timbers. As caterpillars moseyed lazily over the rose-gold clifftop pathways, and new crafts of life emerged from every dusty dangling cocoon nearby, deep in the lilac tidal beat and the dark lap-lap of the water around the jetty poles we’d float like pale jellyfish with improvised scraping tools: paint-strippers, discarded garage-door hinges, screwdrivers. We’d harvest the purple mussels from the old sea-blonded uprights. Then we’d come out of the water and slash the twigs off the whippy tea tree spars of the dunes to take home for Mum to distil and extract the oil. The melaleuca oil was a cure-all then and of course remains so now. But my mother was ahead-of-her-time mad for it. She not only prescribed it for our cuts and colds but used to have us shine our school shoes with it as well. We must have entered the already salty classroom pungent with the stuff.

Looking back, of course, they seem like golden days, when the notion of an indoor creek would have been as strange as a tall ship sailing into Botany Bay. But now as I rolled languidly in my dream towards the familiar scents coming through my loft shutter-door, I felt as though I’d returned to the timeless harvest of my childhood, or as if somehow it had returned to me.

There was a tingling on the perimeters of my waking state. Still half in the dream I could only feel the essence of what it was, an essence so pleasurable, so effortless and heartening that the bridge between golden dream and present day reality seemed no bridge at all. As I emerged, it was as if I was making my descent from high up in the air, and with a pelican’s stable wings. The romantic gliding feeling has never left me to this day, nor has the memory of when my eyes opened and I finally registered, albeit unbelievingly, the ingredients that were making up my pleasure.

It was hard to fathom at first – not so much the familiar perfection of the perfumes but the unexpected beauty of the sound. Others described it later to me as their musical awakening. The Blonde Maria for one was humbled, almost
beyond recall. She flat out refused to sing in The Grand Hotel for weeks afterwards, thereby setting in train the hotel’s most miraculous moments but also perhaps its eventual demise.

As my eyes opened from the dream of golden harvests, I breath ed deeply through my nose and lay still. Along with the rhythmic healing wafts of riverflat melaleuca drifting into my loft came a song, a song like no other.

It really was a song, in the purest sense. And it came from a voice at once so beautiful and ordinary that it seemed both as substantial and ethereal as the sky. In fact, to be more accurate, it was a voice that seemed to contain all the dark heaped-up soil of the earth as well as the endless consolations of the sky’s blue light. In the gentle gusts of our local wind this song sailed like the sun itself from an upper-storey window of the hotel out into the morning air of the backyard, convincing everything it touched and anything that heard it that time itself was no more than a sighing, loving, somehow wistful thing.

I learnt later that it was ‘Di Provenza il mar’, Germont’s baritone aria from La Traviata, but that’s to somehow trivialise what I heard at the time. I knew nothing of operatic names – I still don’t. All I knew was the beauty of a lost world somehow restored to me. Awakening from my dream, it was as if monstrous and needless fissures had been healed.

I propped myself up on an elbow and the singer began the aria again from its beginning. It grew fainter and louder again, and the penny dropped. It could only be The Lazy Tenor, singing this extraordinary welcome to his first day in Mangowak as he moved about his room.

So I lay back again, flat on my pillow, staring joyously at the old barn rafters. What had I said to Veronica when she’d pooh-poohed my comparison of our new visitor with Arthur Cravan? I said I was remaining open to everything.

‘Di Provenza il mar’ has a gentle pulse rather than a time signature, more an aquatic current than a rhythm, but of course, as The Lazy Tenor sang it from his upstairs room that morning, any orchestration there was could only come from the weather itself. In an instant, and for the very first time, I understood all the fuss about operatic singing. I understood the word ‘aria’ for the first time too, the word ‘air’, and that this is the very beautiful thing that sustains us. This was a sound as
superlative and fresh as low-tide abalone, a song with all the tangy nourishment of a December strawberry; it was as miraculous as a champion racehorse from a backwater town, as awe-inspiring as a giant Otway mountain ash. It seemed to capture all peace, hold all power, and at the same time set it free. It included all restless and aimless desires but it also had the certainty of a well struck hammer blow.

As The Lazy Tenor began the aria for the third and last time, a new certainty of my own had begun growing within my chest. There was no way, no way on heaven and earth, that this new guest would be turfed out of my hotel.

It took me a long time, but finally, after the singing had stopped, I managed to rise and climb down my ladder. Pulling back the big barn doors, I went out to investigate.

There was not a sound from the hotel now, either upstairs or down. I made my way through the sunroom into the bar. I fossicked in the cupboards and started to fix myself an omelette. As I cracked a large galaxially speckled Heatherbrae pullet into the skillet, I noticed that still lying on the bar mat was a pink business card from an Altona hairdresser, which The Lazy Tenor had been exhibiting the night before as a souvenir of one of his conquests. The likelihood of the singing I’d just heard coming from the very same man who’d brandished that card like a trophy of war began to seem more and more remote. By the time the fourth egg was in my hands and I’d split it on the cast-iron rim, I was convinced the aria just had to be part of my dream, along with the melaleuca and the mussel harvests.

I leant down into the old champagne bucket where we kept the cut herbs and threw them in with the eggs: parsley, oregano, French tarragon, thyme and Vietnamese mint. As I kept prodding the moist parts of the omelette into the centre of the pan and fluffed and finally folded it onto my plate, the everyday reality of food had almost convinced me that, yes, the super-real aria was from the dream. But then I heard a shifting on the furniture, a creak from near the ashes of last night’s fire. And a quiet voice asked, ‘Is that you, Noel?’

I picked up my plate and carried it to the other side of the bar. I looked around the corner of the L-shaped room. There was The Blonde Maria, seated at
one of the brown laminated tables in her dressing gown, smoking a tailor-made cigarette, with a half eaten chicken carcass and a bottle of ouzo in front of her.

‘An ancient Greek breakfast,’ I joked, pulling up a chair beside her and putting down my plate.

She smiled mildly, then laughed quietly through her nose. She took a swig of ouzo, straight from the bottle.

‘All we need is naked men,’ she said.

I nodded, laughed quietly, then tucked into my omelette. My appetite was strong. Beside me The Blonde Maria just puffed on her cigarette.

Eventually she leant back in her chair, let out a deep chicken-scented breath and asked, ‘Could it really have been him?’

My knife and fork stilled. I considered the question and then asked tentatively, ‘Do you mean the singing?’

The Blonde Maria gazed into my eyes with a glazy look. ‘It’s the most beautiful thing I’ve ever heard,’ she said.

I swallowed, filled my cheeks with air and blew. ‘Well, you won’t get any arguments on that from me. I was just beginning to think I’d dreamt it.’

‘I still can’t believe it,’ she went on. ‘I really can’t. I’d just woken up from the most beautiful dreams. I was riding a grey mare on the indigo slopes back in Dookie. I opened my eyes, felt so free and relaxed, and was about to go down to the ocean for a swim when I heard a man’s footsteps in the hallway and remembered he was staying. So I stopped, sat down on the edge of the bed looking out the window, and waited. And then it started. Oh my God it was beautiful.’

I began eating again. Tink, tink, went the knife and fork. So I hadn’t imagined it, or dreamt it. And up there in the room above us the singer still sat, presumably hunched over a laptop, writing his ribald book.

‘I know there were a few people unhappy with his behaviour last night, Noel, but you can’t kick him out. Not if he sings like that!’ said The Blonde Maria.

I didn’t reply. I finished off the omelette and wiped my mouth. Then I reached over and grabbed the ouzo bottle and took a burst for myself. A hot course of aniseed rushed through my blood.
‘You don’t have to worry, Maria,’ I said then. ‘That fella can stay in my hotel any old time. Let’s just hope “The Tradesman’s Entrance” is a bloody long book.’
The Publican and Her Slushy

As Kooka held up his hand in the pool of light, The Blonde Maria closed the book on her lap and waited. The old man smiled sleepily at her, reached across to the bedside table and turned on the transistor.

At the tiny window high in the western wall beyond Kooka’s bed she could see a single bogong moth batting its wings at the pool of light inside. She kept her eyes on the moth rather than on Kooka, for fear of having any kind of influence on what was about to happen.

They caught the tail end of an interview with a museum curator from the Riverina and then a Lee Kernaghan song took its place, ‘She’s My Ute’. Eventually the song went clunk, Kooka’s bottom jaw relaxed into sleep and the tranny once again turned to static.

After many nights this had become the moment she waited for, and she nodded confidently to herself, reassured by the fact that this was exactly how things had happened on the other nights. A few minutes later, without any sign that the static on the tranny or the moth at the high window were about to disappear, Maria began to get agitated. Then suddenly there was a harsh sound, like a gear being missed, the tranny spluttered, and the static was banished into the night. Once again there was silence and up in the glass of the tiny window the moth had flown away.

And then, after only a few seconds, there it was, the unmistakable sound of someone swimming in the ocean.

She sighed as she pissed. Maria imagined the water up at her neck like a frill of champagne lace, and silver clarity out on the horizon. But this time, before the swimming woman could even begin to make her lists or duck dive, a voice called. The cooee came from back on the beach. A man was trying to reach her over the ocean sounds. The cooee cut through the air: the ‘coo’ provided the stability, the ‘ee’ the open range. It was both distant and close, like a myth.
The swimmer must have felt some hold in the call because she didn’t dive, as she had on previous nights. As the cooees went out across the spray, Maria heard the close sound of elastics-slap against skin as the swimmer adjusted her togs, and the breath of effort as she jumped up through a tumbling oncoming wave.

When the wave passed, the turbulent air calmed, there was a buckle in the wind, a long releasing hiss surrounded her and the cooee came clearer.

She turned now and called back. Presumably she waved.

‘Tom String!’ she cried.

Stepping back towards the beach, her knees rising high, her feet splashed down through the water with the double beat of a human heart. She said the name again but this time quietly to herself: ‘Tom String.’ When her feet were slapping in only an inch or two of water on sand, she whispered, ‘He and Paul have come to get the coal.’

The Blonde Maria was staring at Kooka’s tranny, her mouth open in awe again at what she was hearing. As the woman trod up the beach towards the man called Tom String, she said, ‘You’ve come to get the coal, Tom,’ with her feet now almost silent on the flat tide-slickened sand.

‘Yes, missus. My apologies for upsetting your bath. You looked like a real jollytail out there. I dunno where you get the nerve.’

‘Oh, that’s alright, Tom. It’s a mystery to me why the likes of you resist it.’

Tom String chuckled. His voice had a slow softness about it, almost as if it had grown a fur. ‘Well I tried it once as it happens. As a sapling on Deal Island with my da. Thing was I got a thrashin’ to within an inch of me life. For not knowing my place and thinkin’ I was a fish. You could say I was put off it for good. But as I recall it wasn’t my cup of tea anyhow. I was windy the whole time I was out there.’

‘Well, Tom, I’m sure the thrashing didn’t help,’ the woman said. ‘And do I look like a fish to you? How did Paul travel with the dray?’

‘Oh he played up. Been in a good paddock for too long. Tell me, missus, can a horse become an alcoholic? We’ve gotta stop letting him thorough out the dregs. He’s not meant for a slushy, after all. He’s a palomino for goodness’ sake!’
The woman laughed happily at Tom String’s jesting. Well, at least one thing was cleared up: Tom’s companion Paul was a horse. In the background Maria could hear the tinkle of a harness.

‘Yairs, I got him up the hill on the Boatbuilder’s alright,’ continued Tom String. ‘But cranky? On the level ground across to here you should have seen the fuss. I’m sure he’s got a headache. Then, comin’ down the track to the beach here, he was just plain obstinate. Can’t wait to see him goin’ back uphill with the coal.’

‘But it’s light isn’t it?’

‘Yairs, the coal is. But the dray’s not.’

The woman laughed again. The two were obviously fond of each other, on better terms at least than Tom String and Paul.

Tom String groaned. ‘And don’t go talking to him like a man, Mrs Sweeney. He’ll be ordering whiskey next.’

‘Well I’ve had worse customers in my hotel than poor old Paul.’

‘To be sure. But that’s no reason. Now I suppose I better be getting on with this reef here.’

‘I suppose you know best. What’s say I linger with Paul and hitch a ride back with you on the dray when you’re done? I could help you load and unload.’

‘Aw, there’s no need for that, missus. As you said, this stuff’s nice and light. You duck back into the water if you want. You’re welcome for a ride anyhow.’

‘Thank you, Tom String.’

‘Yairs, missus. And no chattin’ up Paul here while I’m working.’

When Maria first heard the voice and then the mention of the coal, she was none the wiser, but when Tom String actually called her name it was plain.

Mrs Sweeney, he’d said. Maria’s head began to swim. Like everyone else in the hotel she knew the name. Joan Sweeney ran The Grand Hotel for thirteen years till it mysteriously burnt to a crisp sometime in the late 1890s. That was how Joan Sutherland had got his nickname. And now here she was, Joan Sweeney, trying hard not to be too nice to the palomino as Tom String chipped away at the reef with a mattock.
It was a hard sound to listen to – the metal on the rock sent shivers down Maria’s spine – and under the bedclothes in the pool of light even Kooka was stirring. She bit her lip, hoping he wouldn’t wake.

Thankfully the mattock now began to hit softer rock, presumably the coal. It was a lot easier to listen to, more like the sound of an axe on soft wood, and Kooka settled down again among the sheets. He no longer looked so pale either; now there was a freckly blush in his cheeks, as if he, like Joan Sweeney’s offsider, was being warmed by the action.

Gradually the ocean once again stole into the foreground, as Joan Sweeney left off chatting to Paul and made her way back over the sand and into the water. This time she did duck dive, threading her way through the subaquatic hum, breast-stroking beneath the waves, before emerging back into the hiss of pure oxygen. But there were no lists, not like on previous nights, no chicory, no rum, no rushlights or pickled onions, and Maria wondered if that was because Tom String was on the beach. There was no mention of barrels either, no two gross of buttons. Instead she just breathed deep and satisfied sounding breaths, sniffed the salt back into her nostrils and occasionally blew it out again with a honk like a swan.

By the time Joan Sweeney had finished her second swim, Maria’s throat was dry. She didn’t dare budge to go and get a drink, and was kicking herself that she hadn’t brought something into the room with her – a glass of The Dancing Brolga perhaps, or a bottle of Laphroaig.

Now Joan Sweeney was repeating her walk back along the beach to Tom String. The tinkle of Paul’s harness could be heard but no longer the mattock chipping the reef. Presumably Tom had a drayful.

‘That’s a good load,’ she said, as another sound, of the coal thudding and rolling into the timber dray, could be heard.

‘Any more and the drunk’ll strike,’ Tom String replied between hefting. ‘Do they have a union for alcoholic horses, Mrs Sweeney?’

‘I’m sure I don’t know, Tom, but I doubt it. There’s no union for swimming publicans after all.’

Tom String half laughed, half hefted now, causing himself to snort, as if he was the horse in question. ‘Nor for overweight slushies like myself.’
‘Oh I wouldn’t know about that. But I don’t like to hear you call yourself a slushy, Tom. Where would The Grand be without you? Where would I be?’

Tom String scoffed. ‘Oh you’d be fine, missus. There’s plenty of other fellas about who can pour a drink.’

‘Oh yes? And plenty of others who can brew a beer as good as you? And punt the barrels back and forth between the hotel and your camp upstream? And smithy for the nags of the clientele? Polish the fish cutlery, the bone-tweezers, the crab scoops? Remove the brawlers? Boil the eggs for the bar? And all with a lady for a boss, a widow? No, no, Tom, in my experience a slushy is a down-and-out who you feel sorry for, some old swaggie who needs a few bob, some fella with the DTs who you haven’t the heart to throw on the tip. Or a boy for that matter, who can run the glasses and plates for a loose bob. Now that’s a fact, Tom String. I know your mum was native born and I’m from the city, but I’m speaking from experience and you should know better than to call yourself such a thing.’

For a moment the chips of coal ceased thudding into the cart. A gull squawked nearby. There was a tapping sound on fabric as if Tom String was searching in his pockets for a jocular reply.

But then there was a rich knocking sound of wood on wood: his pipe on the edge of the coal-cart. And he said, ‘Phew, missus. There’s no need to get so het up about it. I was only having a lend.’

‘Yes, well nevertheless . . . it’s an important trait . . . for a man to know what he is worth.’

‘That it is, Mrs Sweeney. And for a horse.’

Now there was silence again – if you could call it that, with the ocean so close – and eventually the sound of a match being struck. Then the crackle and pucker of a pipe being sucked.

‘It always buggers me,’ Tom String said, ‘the way those gannets dive out there like that. You’d think their heads would explode as they hit the water.’

‘You would, Tom String. I suppose God made the world though.’

‘Do you think so, Mrs Sweeney? Nah. Tough birds. Hungry birds. It’s amazin’ what you’ll do to get a feed.’
'I suppose they’ve worked out how. Do you not think there’s a god, Tom?'
'Do you, missus?'
'Sometimes, on days like this. When it’s fine enough to swim. '
'Well, as you know, I’m no swimmer. '
'Nor was your father?'
'No, Mrs Sweeney, I don’t believe he was. Always said there was nothin’ but your own nous. He believed the world gone wrong, you see. Since the devil got into it. ’
'The devil?’
'Man. Mankind.’
'And what was it like before that?’
'He said it was like early autumn on the northeast side of King Island. Calm weather and plenty of seals.’
'But no one to sell the skins to, Tom. ’
Tom String paused to suck at his pipe. ‘I suppose you’ve got a point there, missus. No mistakin’ your husband was a lawyer, eh?’
'Well, I didn’t get my ability to reason from him.’
'No? Where did it come from then?’
'Same place as those gannets I suppose.’
Tom String chuckled again; it seemed he couldn’t resist a joke. ‘Yairs, well, there are some at the hotel who call you a tough bird.’
Joan Sweeney laughed too now. ‘Oh, Paul,’ she exclaimed, talking to the horse, ‘no wonder you get cranky with him.’
Maria was on the edge of her seat, feeling both the pleasure and the strain. She couldn’t help but keep expecting the tranny to glitch or for Kooka’s sleep to roll over into some other blank style of restfulness, but it didn’t. This time it stayed constant and clear. Now Tom String and Joan Sweeney were getting up on the cart to ride back to The Grand.
‘Ho, thee! Up there, Pauly!’
Tom String had no plaited whip but a wattle-switch whose leaves could be heard rustling in the air before he brought it down on the flank of the horse. As the cart moved up off the beach and onto the beach track, the timber wheels and joints
knocked and jostled, and the iron parts rattled with the uneven ground. 'He'll be right when we get him past this shoulder, round the hook and up through the elbow there,' said Tom String in an anxious voice. 'Ho, thee, Paul, my friend. Up, up!'

'Right you are, Tom,' Joan Sweeney replied.

The cart jostled on, with Paul snorting, his shod feet clinking on what sounded like shelly rather than stony ground. The coal in the back could be heard too, shifting about lightly as first one wheel of the cart then the other rose and fell on the rooty camber. Occasionally, too, the ratcheting sound of a wattlebird would pierce all this with harshness.

Apart from Tom String’s geeing of the horse, neither he nor Joan Sweeney spoke for some time now, presumably until the difficulties of the track had been negotiated. Either that or they were absorbed enough by their progress to sit silently on the dray in the sunshine, as Paul did the work. But when eventually the publican did speak, it was to point out a burrowing echidna that had stopped Paul in his tracks.

Tom String had put the sudden halt down to his horse’s pure contrariness and had begun to curse. ‘You can’t prop here and leave us hangin’ off the hillside! C’mon, horse, it’s not just me and the coal you’re haulin’. Think of your good friend, Mrs Sweeney, damn you!’

Then Joan Sweeney had called out, ‘It’s a hedgehog, Tom, in the middle of the track. That’s what’s stopped him.’

Sure enough the next thing was Tom String jumping down off the cart and shoo-shooing the echidna. He knew Paul wasn’t budging and he grew increasingly frustrated, caught as he was between the stubborn self-preserving instincts of two animals. Eventually he asked Joan Sweeney to pass him down the mattock from the cart. ‘Nothing that a bump on the scone won’t fix,’ he said.

In The Sewing Room Maria was alarmed, but quickly there was a dull thump, a crunch, and then a bosky slither-sound in sandy soil, as Tom String pushed the dead echidna to the side of the track. By the gristly noise of it he gutted the creature right on the spot and then picked it up, no doubt tentatively, and placed it with the coal in the back of the dray. He laid the mattock in its toolbox,
hauled himself back into position with a grunt, and once again gee'd the horse. With the echidna out of his line the tinkle of Paul’s harness resumed, as did the wooden music of the dray.

When they reached the top of their climb, the effort in Paul’s nostrils grew easy, and he was even congratulated by Tom String. ‘There’s a boy, Pauly, we’re back on top of the world now, old son.’

‘Yes, and thanks to you we’ve got a hedgehog to boil tonight,’ Joan Sweeney chimed in. ‘Good work, Pauly.’

‘Now don’t get too excited, missus,’ said Tom String. ‘One won’t go far in the ’otel. Unless you’re Jesus Christ.’

‘Mmm, that’s right. It’s a delicacy, Tom. I’d nearly eat one all by myself. If we see another one heading back, let’s get it.’

‘Rightio, missus. And look out for some pigface would ya, to cut the fat.’

The level ground now reduced the sound of the dray, and the tread of the palomino’s hooves was duller in the dirt. Tom String had mentioned the Boatbuilder’s Track previously, and naturally Maria took it to be what these days we call Boatbuilder’s Road. So now she pictured the dray heading across the long ridge to where the Boatbuilder’s eventually descends steeply down onto the riverflat.

As they jigged along more easily, Joan Sweeney discussed hotel matters with her right-hand man while he pursed away again at his pipe.

‘Mr Arvo suggested he might stay another week,’ she said matter-of-factly. ‘Said he approves of the fare and there’s no point leaving the sea in fine weather.’

‘Exotic lodgers eh, Mrs Sweeney?’ replied Tom String, his voice suddenly a little surly. ‘Well, a few extra coins I suppose. Mind you he’s got the top room. But make sure he pays in pounds and shillin’s. Not books like last time. Come to think of it, what do they use for money in the Baltic?’

‘I asked him, Tom. It’s markkas where he’s from. But he’s not out here for the gold. And he only left the books last time because I suggested it – for the hotel shelf. A bit of reading matter for weary travellers. Don’t you worry, he’ll have the right stuff.’

‘Oh well, you know best. But don’t get me wrong, missus. I don’t mind Mr Arvo.’
‘Turn it up, Tom String, that’s not what I heard.’
‘How do you mean, missus?’
‘I heard you told him to stop singing the other night.’
‘Aw, that was only because he was making the beer go flat.’
Joan Sweeney scoffed in amusement.
‘No, but in all seriousness, missus, a few of the boys were concentratin’ hard on Bertie Bolitho’s round of poker. Didn’t want any blood spilt. Not from the old Balt. Plus, his music’s from a different country to mine. Must say, though, he was quite accommodatin’ when I put it to ’im.’
‘I bet he was. A man of your size.’
‘Well, you know me, missus. I don’t throw me weight around unless it’s warranted.’
‘That’s true, Tom. But Mr Arvo doesn’t know that.’

For a moment then the tranny glitched, Maria gave a start in the wicker chair, and Kooka adjusted himself in the bedclothes. Her thirst was raging as she watched him hunch up his shoulders and chap his lips together, before turning off his side and away from where he’d been facing the tranny, to lie flat on his back right in front of her. The tranny spluttered, as if mis-receiving short wave, once again she bit her lip, not able to bear the thought that she’d lose contact, and then, as a gust of night wind fluttered the curtains in the inland window beyond the pool of light, the transmission cleared. Kooka chapped his lips together one last time, and the sound of the rollicking cart, with its load of black Bass Strait coal and a gutted echidna, disappeared from the room.
Archipelago Of Souls
(Picador 2015)

In the aftermath of the Second World War, an Australian soldier, Wesley Cress, a hero of the underground resistance on German-occupied Crete, seeks solace and comfort on King Island, in the mouth of Bass Strait, in the Roaring Forties latitude of the Southern Ocean.

Wesley carries in his heart the infernal story of the Battle of Crete, the disappearance of his brother in the ensuing evacuation, and the hellish journey he was forced to take after he was left behind on the ancient island.

When he meets Leonie Fermoy, the granddaughter of an American whaler with her own nightmares, the private and the public battles of their post-war worlds begin to fuse. Through the agency of John Lascelles - the unassuming postmaster on the island and a crusader for the rights of returned soldiers - Wes and Leonie attempt to negotiate a future in which love can prevail in a morally devastated world.

Archipelago of Souls is a novel exploring the difficult realities of nationhood, war, morality and love. Compelling and beautifully realised, it is about the creation of identity, the enigmas of memory and the power of the written word to heal the deepest wounds.

The canvas of Mangowak is widened in Archipelago of Souls, in order to show how the type of characters established in the previous three novels might respond when taken out of their home-landscape and placed in an international context. In this case it is a context of war, specifically the Battle of Crete in 1941, where issues surrounding the concepts of national and regional identity, and the mythological disruption of Australian culture, are contextualised within an ancient island culture whose famous mythological matrix provides an important basis for western culture, including Australia. The mythological continuity on Crete is contrasted with its inverse on King Island in Bass Strait, which Wesley Cress returns to after the war. Archipelago of Souls is the first in a trio of books which will explore the responses of characters from my bioregion to international situations. The second of these books A Sand Archive, narrates the story of sand dune engineer, FB Herschell, who finds himself in France during the May 1968 student and worker demonstrations. A Sand Archive will be published by Picador in May 2018.
When I left Agio Dormiton that morning I could see the criss-crossing options laid out, the pale clay paths ribboning the slopes of the descent in front of me. But strangely, I felt I couldn't miss. The lie of the land, my course to the south, like everything else in the amoral universe, seemed suddenly very simple. One path might be more exposed than the other but in the end how was I to know? The very nature of the sweat coming through my pores seemed already transformed by the pulling of the trigger. I no longer stank with fear. I was no longer unhinged by shock.

As I set off down the slope I did not care anymore for a reckoning of sources. In the end nothing was proved by where you were from, what your name was, nor what you claimed your cause to be: an Orthodox monk meditating on the death of Christ's mother; a British archaeologist finding wisdom in an ancient shard; an Aussie digger calling a spade a spade. Not to mention an RN admiral running a tight ship in defence of the free world. Even the dead virgin herself, with her unconditional compassion, was someone I might meet on the road.

I wore remnants of at least three uniforms: *pallikari* bog-catchers, an Englishman’s car-coat, my dog tags hidden in the hair of my chest. But they couldn’t claim me now. Not even as some kind of unofficial Australian mongrel. The motley garb was more than emblematic and I was beyond it all, with only the sea ahead of me. I had travelled inward and far.

By lunchtime, with the travel all downhill and winding forever across the spiny slopes, and hairpinning down through country parched from the sun reflecting off the far sheet of saltwater and belted dry by the Libyan sea winds, and all alone with not even a goat by the roadside and no vultures in the sky, I got to rummaging quite differently through my condition. Perhaps I was simply refreshed by the reflections brought on by finally walking again after the long period of stillness.
Either way, it was as I came traipsing down the zigzagging track, with orange rocks on my high side and the dramatic cut of the Arvi gorge looming against the sea and sky below, that I arrived at an unexpected and liberating notion.

When our mum was dying, it was Vern who was bundled up beside her in the bed. I understood now how that saved him from being boiled down to just another wiry countryman. In the mornings he and I would walk the track round the lakeshore to the school, our pockets stuffed with knucklebones and slingshots, as if nothing out of the ordinary was going on, as if our house hadn’t become like a hole in the daylight. But I could smell her on him even out there in all that air. He carried her with him wherever he went. We’d return after school, do our jobs under Dad’s instructions, and after tea the situation would deepen. I’d be allowed to sit on her bed and chat about the day. But every night through that long year it was the same. Baby’s bedtime would come, I’d get a loving kiss on the cheek and have to leave her. I’d go blinking into the light of the kitchen and he would disappear through the door I’d emerged from. Leaving me alone, with Dad and the smell of lamb’s fry on the stove.

Sometimes she’d heft herself up out of the blankets and I’d hear her going over to the piano. I’d duck outside, around through the laundry and listen breathless from out under the verandah, estranged from the thick interior of her dying, listening not so much to the notes she played – those surging runs from the airs of Moore she loved so much – but to the high aether of the notes, the echoes ringing in the painted eaves of the dark room. At the touch of the soft hammers on the strings I saw stars ignite in the night sky. Those high sounds became proof of another existence to me; it was nothing that you could write on paper but without the echoes the air would have been strung tight, clipped as a train ticket. This was my mother in the music, this was her solution to the unsolvable mystery: her slow death in our growing lives.

Gradually through that year she became more echo than music, her body thinning amongst the fug of the sheets and eventually tapering like the light effects on the lake at dusk.

This is what Vern had absorbed in the bed. Her wishing him close was his real education. The poems he got interested in after she was gone: the Brooke, the
Byron, the John Shaw Neilson, were his stars in the eaves. And even more telling was the womanly sweat of her armpits, her whispering, the smell of iodine on the blankets, the liquid music of her bedpan in the cold hours of the night, the old Tipperary mottoes she mumbled as together they awoke, the mother and child, at dawn by the lake.

This is what I had mistakenly thought it was my duty to deny. That real power manifests not in the note but in the echo, in the presence of death in the room of life, in the spirit of a woman staying alive in the growing identity of a boy.

This was Vern’s fullness, what gave him his fearlessness. What sent him up onto those broken rafters of Iraklio on the night of the evacuation.

Our mother’s truth. As the precious sky above our lake was torn apart and opened. And she ascended into heaven. This is why I felt left behind.

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There were no villages on the dusty road I’d taken, no kaphenois, not even a roadside shrine. I was glad I’d had the presence of mind to take the food from Agio Dormiton. Eventually I clambered up a small cutting off the road, sat under a rare shady tree and ate. I scanned the sky through the branches, slurped on the messy juice of a marrow and kept an ear out for engines or warning sounds on the track below.

It was the absence of anything but blueness overhead and the utter silence of those deserted slopes that I remember most. Even through the mozzled shade of the tree the sun was warm and though the slope itself was scrabbly and harsh, with each passing minute I could feel my muscles thawing and the tissues of my flesh softening.

We had no need to ask where our mother’s knowledge and beauty came from, she was always telling us: the cool black soil, the lava crumble, the loamy guzzles and dry rises of stone and bracken, the plains of fescue and turkey bustards round the lakes. In the sagging iron bed, as Vern had imbibed her tales and absorbed the pictures, I’d felt locked out in a streaky place resembling the lake when the water dried up. Marooned, with Dad’s dudgeon. Poor Dad. The bastard. He stalled, he
wouldn’t cry, and expected me to be the same. In the end I reckon he was only half human from trying so hard. Shrill as fence-wire in a northerly. Then silent as the volcano. I lay back under the tree and sighed a thawing sigh.

Later that day, on the winding downward march, Ken Callinan came into my head. The Ken we knew before his face fell half off. He was the salt in the soup, Ken Cal, such a good bloke to have around. He stood square on the ground, the duty came natural to him, he had no trouble walking in the nation’s shoes, had no desire to be anyone else, any better or worse. Or so it seemed. But in that courtyard, under the moist sponge in Adrasteia’s hand, I remember the moment. When his struggle to speak, his need to stem the flow of blood with words and my attempts to keep the parts of his face and head together so that he could do so, so that he could live and be heard, was superseded. His eyes began to stare as if at some puzzle back inside himself, a puzzle resolving. Was he listening to the music? Seeing stars come to life in the eaves?

We leant in close to him and there were no longer ranks or reveille, no definitions of Private Kenneth Callinan. We felt it, Adrasteia and I, this thing beyond names, and what’s stranger is we knew it well too, as if beforehand.

And then he was gone. Ken Cal. And after one of those deep and holy pauses that if you’re lucky follows death, the horns of Jericho started screaming again, our hands went to our ears, time and the battle carried us on. Now on the road above Arvi I knew that that was what was worth telling, the only thing I could tell Ken’s dad about, what I’d recount to his mother and sisters too, on the mint settee in Newcastle. If only I could find the words. For how he came into his fullness.

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By dusk I’d noticed the brush of the mountainous slopes giving way to olive groves again and reckoned by this alone that, despite the zigzags, I was more than halfway down. I’d still not seen a living soul, and from side to side I’d tacked all day, alert to all possibilities, in keeping with the revolutions of my mind. My feet were sore, from not having walked for so long, and after making the decision not to continue
through the night I grew instantly rather weary. I looked around for a place to prop, somewhere level and hidden, to eat again, and sleep.

I wandered on slowly, past sprays of rockrose in the cuttings of the track, squinting into the thick shade of the olives, and thinking I might even chance upon a wayside chapel, some star of the sea. I thought of the monk. His body would have gone cold by now. The terraces of Agio Dormiton would be dead quiet. The bell would be still. Not for the first time that day I marvelled at my lack of remorse. Not even a twinge. Perhaps I was no longer human after all? It was hard to tell, being so far out on my own.

But no, it couldn’t be. I felt strong, strangely complete, and felt my life so keenly. More keenly than I ever had. It wasn’t the taste of Andreas’ blood I had in my mouth but the taste of my own self-creation.

We live in our natures, as beasts and by rote until this moment comes. For many it arrives at the point of death, when death, as it seemed to do for Ken Cal, appears like a new sunrise. But for others I believe the moment sidles up in the midst of living. That’s when a morality is born rather than inherited, when it takes its place in harmony not with duty but with freedom.
Those first few nights with Leonie at Wait-a-While I was aware of her listening out, for a footfall outside the hut, a human movement, even perhaps the loading of a gun. I held her in my arms imagining all types of stereotypic chivalries I could perform, but I never said a word about them and in the end nothing of the kind was required. Nat Fermoy never came near the place.

It wasn’t in her nature to abandon her father completely, an old man now, in an empty farmhouse, surrounded by scrimshaw ghosts and tragic memories. Once a week she’d cycle off to take him food, she’d cook him a steak, she said, fry him a fish, run his clothes through the mangle and hang them out to dry, on condition that he never said a word, ever again, either about the past or the future. One word, she told him, one whining bleat or recrimination, and she’d be out of there, never to return.

She told me things in that first summer of our love, about her growing up, her roamings alone amongst the boxthorns, the way he used to keep her locked up and scared. But it wasn’t until later, until we’d moved down here to Naracoopa, that I found out the worst of it, and that, ironically enough, was all due to our deepening friendship with Lascelles.

It had taken Lascelles years to finally cobble the money together to have the Memorial Reading Room built. It still stands today, a humble enough structure on the slope there in Currie, but nicely built by the Sanders twins from Surprise Bay. John Sanders had helped me out with this and that when I was building the hut at Wait-a-While and so eventually, after Leonie had stayed put with me and the time came for us to move down the hill for a fresh start near the water, it was he that we asked to do the job. By that stage it was 1951 I believe, the year before they finally built the memorial, and it was Lascelles’ visit out to our new place that convinced him that the time was right to finally get cracking. The problem was that, despite all his fundraising efforts, he and his committee had still fallen short of the required
mark. But, after seeing what the Sanders boys had done here for us, and having come to feel quite a deal of personal pressure that the unconventional nature of the memorial he was advocating was the sole reason for the delay, Lascelles decided to take a personal loan of eight hundred pounds to get things over the line.

Like everyone on the island, Leonie and I had watched the fundraising campaign from the outset, but now, as Lascelles took us into his confidence about the loan, we sat back to marvel at the courage of his convictions. The committee he’d formed at the outset had had countless blues over the journey, many defections and attempted coups, but no one had been able to divert Lascelles from the path. In the end I would have to say that, despite his extreme eggheadedness, his social awkwardness, and the touch of the otherworldly that he had about him, Lascelles turned out to be a damned convincing negotiator.

‘What on earth is wrong with erecting another plinth,’ was the common cry, ‘it would cost less and be in step with every other memorial around Australia.’

‘But no,’ Lascelles would calmly say in the monthly meetings held in the hall, ‘can we not offer our diggers more than a mere symbol of our respect? Can’t we offer them, in the difficult years of their resettlement, not only a roof over their head but a path to healing, to happiness?’

In the end it was the island’s taste for practical improvisation that helped get Lascelles’ unusual notion over the line. We are an island after all, an outlier to the mainstream, and though the very fact of our separation can lead to an anxious kind of conformism at times, for the most part, through basic necessity, we end up doing things pretty much our own way.

Lascelles had already accumulated a vast amount of books, clippings, unit histories, and other military documentation, even before the Memorial Reading Room was built. The stories written about me by the journalist fella Noonan were part of this collection, the rest of which Leonie and I saw with our own eyes when, after he had visited our place and made his decision, he requested we visit his house just up the hill from the PO to help confirm to his father that the Sanders twins would be the right choice to build the memorial.

By this stage, and certainly under Leonie’s influence, my position on Lascelles had already softened somewhat. I was learning to tolerate his company, just so long
as he didn’t harass me about where I’d been, what I’d done, what I’d seen. Deeper down though, I already harboured a silent store of sympathy for the man. I knew what he’d done for me, even if I didn’t have the wherewithal to admit it. And the fact that he still felt the need to get his father’s approval before proceeding with what he considered to be his national duty amused me greatly at the time.

We knocked on the door that day, sat at the kitchen table with his old dad, Kenneth, who seemed rather a different man at home, without his green post office visor. He had just been for his constitutional swim under the Currie lighthouse, I remember, and his white hair was swept with quite a salty flourish to one side of his narrow head. The elder Lascelles was always very taciturn in the PO but he seemed quite enlivened by our visit to his home and, after approving without hesitation our reckonings regarding the Sanders brothers, he even opened up a little about his prior life in Melbourne, when John was a boy and Mrs Lascelles was still about.

I sensed a certain loneliness about the Lascelles house as old Kenneth spoke about their golden days on Port Phillip Bay. The father and son were both far from your common knockabout types, and neither of them had what you’d call the common touch. They were thinkers, not eccentric as such, but outsiders just the same.

Eventually, after polishing off a sherry with his father, we were ushered keenly by the younger Lascelles down a hallway towards his den at the back of the house, which was positively stuffed with papers and books and whatnot, all to do with the war. I had just expected a quick cup of tea and a chat, I hadn’t expected to be exposed to all that and felt immediately as if I’d walked into some kind of trap. Leonie however quietly pinched me before I could even develop a scowl. Of course Lascelles’ purpose was not to trap me in his lair but merely to demonstrate how urgent he felt the need for the building of the Memorial Reading Room was. Well, I could certainly see what he meant. You could hardly move in that little den of his, and on the way home Leonie and I spoke of our astonishment at the dedication of his mission.

‘If it was me,’ I remember saying, ‘I’d collect Phantom comics and be done with it. The info’d be about as trustworthy, and a hell of a lot cheaper.’
Leonie laughed. ‘That’s all very well,’ she said, ‘but what if old Ken doesn’t agree?’

The joke had a bit of extra bite coming from her, who’d only recently begun to throw off the shackles of her own widowed father.

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Contrary to what some people think, Leonie and I had made our decision to move from Wait-a-While even before things were taken out of our hands by it burning down. But up it went the old place, with my few remaining possessions, my furniture and clothes, my dad’s tobacco case, Vern’s copy of Epictetus, and all bar one of the packages I’d written to Leonie. That last one, the one I’d written but never had to send – not until Lascelles passed on and we buried him at Wait-a-While – was still in the pocket of my overcoat, hanging on a hook in the bicycle shed near the hut, where Brian Robinson used to keep his hay.

It was a hole rusted through the old kero tin flue that officially set the place on fire but I often wonder if that old hut of hessian and newsprint actually made its own mind up after all. It was almost as if the joists and bush-jambs of Wait-a-While had overheard us discussing the move and had taken it as either an insult or with humble acceptance of the end of the road. Well, I could at least say the hut had been my second skin and confidante, until Leonie moved in and it came to personify an isolation I was learning to outgrow.

To be honest though, I’ve never entirely outgrown that isolation, and nor has she. The solitude that descends upon a person when they are divided from their mother at birth is a condition that, in both of our lives, and for different reasons, has managed to prevail. It would be true to say that in the first months of her shacking up with me at Wait-a-While we had some difficulty being together. And not just because old Nat was thunderstruck that she’d gone. If, in fact, it was the case that the old hut was eavesdropping on our new arrangement then it might have come to the conclusion we were being a bit gruff with each other as we moved about the house. A bit short. Insensitive, perhaps. Though really, it wasn’t like that. Quite the opposite. After spending our whole lives apart we found our way of
coming together mainly through silence. By quietly looking each other in the eye, and knowing all that had gone before. We still had things to tell, of course, but this time we could say them not with pen and ink, or buttery shortbread and kindling, but by the fire we shared outside the hut at night, sitting on the brow of the hill under the stars, with our pent-up feelings set free and the violence of the sea well below us.

After we’d moved down the hill, Lascelles took to visiting us more often, mainly on Sundays. He was experiencing a great mixture of emotions now that his memorial idea had finally become concrete. On the one hand, he was more inspired than ever by actually having the building in existence, but, on the other, he had to face the daily feeling of deflation at the obvious lack of interest in the reading room on behalf of the island SS.

I for one found it considerably easier to be with Lascelles now the building was out of the way. I’d hear the high note of his Velocette coming down the hill of a Sunday and actually be happy that he was on his way. Leonie and I would have a ploughman’s lunch prepared, or a casserole in winter, and then the three of us would go fishing together on the jetty, or we’d drive up to Sea Elephant and walk leisurely out over the mudflats to the river mouth. We enjoyed many easy Sundays staying out right into the dusk, looking for remains of the old hunter’s shacks from way back in the 1800s, chatting about local affairs, Leonie’s growing interest in the plants unique to King, books we were reading, and inevitably too about the war. Or should I say, Lascelles would talk about the war. He still got barely a word out of me on the subject, though I remember us talking at length one windy day at the Blowhole about the fall of Singapore, a subject I knew nothing whatsoever about, having been incommunicado on the Cretan massifs at the time that it happened, and incurious since I’d returned. Leonie seemed to know a bit about it though and Lascelles lent me an article on the subject, which in fact I read with great interest. But if he ever dared to take things further, to probe into the enigmas of my own war, I always gave him short shrift. I still felt raw enough about it all that what I had written in the pages to Leonie could only be entrusted on the true proviso of love. And even though Lascelles was becoming my most trusted male companion on the
island I would not, at that time, have gone so far as to describe what ran between us as love.

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We had not yet put the phone on here at Naracoopa in those days, so, despite the increasing use of cars on the island, communication could be difficult. One Sunday I was holed up in bed with a bad cold when we heard the Velocette whining down the hill. There’d been no easy way of letting Lascelles know that I’d come down with something the night before and not to come out on his weekly visit. So on he came, with a bag of peaches and nectarines from his father’s garden, only to find me out of action. After a cup of tea and a brief discussion, he and Leonie decided to make up a picnic and go off on their own in search of fish.

It was a nothingish kind of day, cloudy, with a light September wind, and as she described it to me later, the words just started coming out of her mouth before she really knew what was happening.

They were on the northern side of the jetty, with the usual three or four cormorants perched alongside, and that lightest of southerlies behind them. Councillor Island was in view, as well as the beach, its white streak running all the way up to the high hummocks of Cowper Point in the distance. They had always been tender with each other, Leonie and Lascelles, going right back to when I first arrived, and, as she said, it can get very pleasant and deep-feeling out on that jetty on a calm day when there’s no fish biting.

Lascelles was describing to her a rare visitor who’d turned up at the reading room a couple of days previous. When the man, who Lascelles had never seen before, expressed surprise at the extent of the collection of books and documents assembled there, Lascelles had taken it upon himself to expound his theory about the benefits of time spent in meditation, with books and writing materials, for those who’ve experienced the traumas of war. At this the man slumped heavily down into one of the chairs provided, muttering something about hailing from a long way away, from Queensland, from right up the top above Cairns. And what brings you to King Island? Lascelles had asked. But the man did not answer. He had
gone beyond answering. Instead he sat motionless, with a blank face, until quietly he began to cry.

As Lascelles said to Leonie, he didn’t know where to look, it was so unexpected for a grown man to do such a thing. But there they were, the tears slipping freely down the man’s face and him not even reaching for his handkerchief as they did so.

Lascelles tried to comfort the man and eventually left the room to make him a cuppa from the urn. But by the time he came back the man was gone. Must have just slipped out the side door, Lascelles said, otherwise I would have seen him go out through the foyer from the kitchen.

On the jetty there were no bites on the ends of their lines, the water was a calm blue skin, but in the telling of this strange encounter Leonie could sense that Lascelles had become quite het up. He had such a sincere and caring soul, Lascelles, but also of course that racing mind. He began to speculate as to how he could locate the crying man from Queensland, how he could help him, and whether or not Leonie had any idea who he might be or what boat he came in on. She could see his distress, he was shaking his head and going over all the possibilities of who the man was. Before long she felt that, in his agitation, Lascelles too might even begin to cry.

And so it was that, by way of helping him, she told Lascelles a story of her own. The story of the glowing coals. When she told me about it later she said it was just an instinctual thing, ostensibly to steady Lascelles’ ship, to break his fixation on the crying man who, she had suddenly presumed, represented to Lascelles the grief he felt for his own dead mother.

You see. We were all motherless, all three of us, right through those growing days of our friendship.

But it was more than that too, Wes, she said. It was the jetty, you know, the calm sea, the slow waves with the kelp beneath. I’ve always loved Naracoopa since I was a girl and now, finally, I was here. Living here, you know. With you. I felt safe, maybe for the first time, happy and safe. And with that feeling the time had come to tell it.

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Amongst the anguish of her girlhood, the dark rooms of her father’s house, his bullish paddocks, the estrangement between him and her Uncle True, there had been one day that she had blacked out, one day that was worse than all the rest. Her father could be perfectly kind to her, in keeping with the absence in their lives, but at other times it was all well beyond his control. He had locked her up, yes; beaten her, yes, even as an adult; and now she interrupted Lascelles to tell him this, as they sat with their rods alongside the cormorants of the jetty.

‘But the worst,’ she said, in an almost-whisper that would have been barely audible if the sea had not been so tranquil, ‘was when he went and saw the fortune teller down at Grassy.’

She took a deep breath as it came back to her. After all those years. ‘For a time he used to hear horses every night,’ she told him, ‘and I’d hear him yelling them away in his dreams. I knew they were horses because he’d call out and sometimes I was so terrified that I would even go into his room and light the lamp to wake him, and he would talk breathlessly about them. “They’re coming round the lagoon,” he’d say, “coming over the hill. They’re thundering for us,” he’d say, quite out of breath, “thundering.”

‘It was around that time we had a visit on the island from a fella calling himself Genghis, who had advertised in the paper before he arrived, calling himself a faith healer and a fortune teller. From time to time we’d get these kind of visitors on King, no different really from a visit from a barber from Tassie or the dentist with his foot-operated drill. Anyway, without my knowing, Dad went off on the pony and trap to see this Genghis down at Grassy, where he’d set himself up with a small sign and a table outside the bar there.

‘Then one day, not long after, I’d got it into my mind to head off to school – which I didn’t always do but this day, for some reason, I wanted to – and Dad wouldn’t let me. He’d been up early and had a raging fire going in the kitchen. It wasn’t even that cold. I remember I was dressing for school when he came into my bedroom and told me I wasn’t to go. I asked why not and he said he had a very important job for me. I asked him what it was and he said he’d tell me soon enough, and then went back out into the kitchen.
‘I was miserable as it was and so I crawled back into my bed and got under the blankets. I was lying there, contemplating jumping out the window, when he called my name. It was too late. I didn’t move. So he came in and silently, without a word, lifted me up out of the bed in his arms. He carried me to the kitchen where I saw he’d cleared away the table and chairs from their usual position on the floor and in their place he’d shovelled hot coals from the stove, laying them out on a spot on the wooden floor. I remember seeing the soot-handled shovel standing beside.

“What are you doing, Da, you’ll burn the house down,” I cried. I thought rightly that he’d gone balmy, and was wriggling to get free. But he just strode straight over to the glowing coals and, without so much as a word, began to lay me down upon them.

‘I screamed, and screamed again, but he held me there, my own father, held me fast, forcing me down onto them on my back, saying it was the only way, the way to make things right, and that I was a good girl and would I just do this last thing for him, to cure us all as Genghis said, or some such thing . . .

‘I screamed and screamed, from the pain and the heat but more the terror of it all, the madness, the look in his face as he did what the faith healer had instructed.

‘I must have fainted then because the next I knew I was in the washhouse, with Uncle True beside me, swabbing my back and legs.

“It’s all right, girlie,” he said, “I’ve got you now, just in the nick of time. It’s all right, girlie.”

‘As it turns out, I was lucky. True just happened to have come over that morning, and he’d just arrived, only seconds before I went out. He could hardly imagine the scene he found as he burst through the back door but, as he said, all my screaming had saved me because he was only planning to get a roll of eight-gauge from the shed. He and Nat weren’t talking by then and he’d never even planned to come up to the house till he heard my cries.’

 Leonie fell silent on the jetty. Lascelles turned to look at her, as she pulled her beanie close round her ears and stared out towards Councillor Island. Eventually she confessed that until that moment she’d blacked the whole thing out. In sympathy he said he could well understand why. For how, after all, do we speak the unspeakable, even to ourselves?
It was Leonie who started crying then, but gently, her tears rolling slowly like the sea below. Uncle True had never told a soul about what had happened and that, of course, was a terrible secret he chose to carry. For months, nearly a year afterward, she had chosen not to have anything to do with him and stayed well clear of the old Fermoy house, despite him having saved her. And when she finally did start turning up back at Yellow Rock, the fact that he’d never reported Nat and had left her living with him alone never even entered her conscious mind. It was just her life, she said, her motherless family, the world of those two womanless brothers on her grandfather’s island.

I knew as soon as they returned from the jetty that day that something had passed between them. But I didn’t know what. I was feeling a little better for the rest I’d had and volunteered to cook us some eggs for tea. We ate them with lemon whiskey and beans and we laughed and played cards and ate chocolate until well past midnight. He was actually a great mimic Lascelles and when he was relaxed could really be quite funny.

I had not been privy to what had passed between the two of them on the jetty but nevertheless, as we farewelled Lascelles at the gate, I felt that something had deepened, that he had, from that moment on, become an indispensable stitch in the fabric of our destiny.
That night in the olives trees above Arvi I dreamt of a stagnant pool covered with algae. My father stood beside it, like a sentry, as if he was somehow in charge of it. Amongst the algae, on the thick slimy surface of the pool, Andreas’ body lay floating. Slowly, with encouragement from a stick my father held in his hand, it began to turn over in the water until finally I was looking at the monk’s face. His mouth was slack but his eyes, even in death, seemed to peer straight into me.

I woke from this dream just on first light, with a bad feeling, my new-found fullness gone, and, from under the branches where I lay, the silhouette of the high walls of the gorge in the distance below stood like an enormous stone vice against a wheat-sheaf sky. Still quite exhausted, I sank immediately back into sleep and when I woke again it must have been quite late. I felt refreshed, as I had the day before, and resolved to get on my way.

After an hour or two I was below the treeline and could no longer see the sea. But I could smell the salt strongly now, and felt the sharp contrast of energies the world takes on at its shorelines. In a field by the roadside I sighted an old chair standing alone, its stuffing spilt. Then I saw people for the first time since leaving the monastery: a family, grandmother and children included, tilling bushy rows of wind-stunted beans. I was tempted to acknowledge their presence with a nod or a wave, as much out of politeness as any attempt to maintain my disguise, but when they just stared at me I found it unnerving and thought better of it. I set my eyes back on the track and walked on.

A mile or so further and the road grew sandy, it ran level and parallel with the shore in a westerly direction to what I presumed would be the village of Arvi, which I’d decided, from the scraps of information about the south coast that I’d picked up along the way, was the place where I would be most likely to find a boat. I wondered, really for the first time since leaving Agio Dormiton, how it all would work for me there. How would I set about making the right connection to get me
onto a boat? I felt little anxiety about the outcome, as if it was myself who had died with those shots from Spenser’s revolver, as if I was wandering the coast like some unassailable ghost.

Eventually I emerged out of shrubbery right up against the beach, and walked for a time listening to the regular dump of the waves against foreign-looking ash-coloured sand. Out over the water, the sky too had an ashen tint, the horizon towards Africa seemed dirty and sullied, and I guessed why. Something to do with the combinations of wind and war.

My first impulse was to scan the water for boats, but I saw nothing. My eyes fell back to the deserted road and I continued. After another mile or two, and just as I was feeling that the south coast was almost devoid of human activity, I found myself standing in front of a small taverna.

The slanting roof of this rubbly hovel would have been barely six feet from the ground. I noticed two more buildings just like it further down the street, one with rush chairs out the front, and another two buildings even further along past that. The empty chairs all faced the empty shore, as if waiting for something that might never come, or as if the sea was a stage for favourite stories to be enacted upon, when and if its audience finally arrived. The ashen sky became a grey proscenium, and the whole scene was dwarfed by the towering massif I’d descended from. I felt like I’d stumbled into the strangest, saddest, village on earth.

Two men came out onto the covered terrace of the taverna, talking like fellow townsfolk do the whole world over, about some important local issue no doubt, some person’s foible or small-time scandal in their midst. I could tell by the familiarity of the way they were enjoying their chat that they weren’t discussing anything as incomprehensible as the war.

They must have noticed me standing out on the road between the terrace and the beach but they betrayed no sign of it. I listened to them speak, noted the familiar tones, the pleasure they took in disagreeing. The taller of the two men was dressed in a decidedly untypical way – in fact it was the first time in my life that I had seen a pair of the American-style denim jeans that became so popular after the war. Above the jeans he wore a dusty but nevertheless impressive houndstooth jacket, with a schoolmaster’s patches on its elbows, and in the breast pocket of this
jacket hung a pair of steel-rimmed reflective sunglasses, which, like the jeans, seemed a great novelty to me in those days before I’d had anything to do with the Yanks.

The worldliness of this character was the last thing I’d expected to find, and although his get-up could quite reasonably have given me cause for optimism, the sheer difference of it made me windy just the same. I s’pose I felt by now that no one on Crete was exactly as they appeared. There was no reason why this bloke should be the exception.

His friend, dressed in the dark duds and shirt of an ordinary villager, showed no obvious deference towards the man in the worldly clothes and I would’ve bet they’d known each other all their lives. Even so, it was the unlikeness of the tall man’s garb that I couldn’t trust and I turned and walked back the way I’d come, hoping that they would continue to ignore me in the midst of their conversation.

I walked fast to the east till I felt clear of the village. I slowed, looked back over my shoulder onto the dry lonely road, and figured I was safe.

Up on the rising slopes a few miles further along, I noticed the high cut of the gorge. I realised by its distance, and by one or two remarks of Andreas’ that had led me to believe the little port of Arvi was almost directly below the rocky cut, that the tiny settlement I had just encountered was not Arvi at all. I decided that it was a stroke of luck that I’d turned on my heel, and I resolved to keep going east, with the epic walls of the gorge as my bearing, in the hope that there was some turn-off from the road I had missed coming down that would cut across the lower slopes and lead me to the village of Arvi, where I hoped I stood some kind of chance of finding a boat.

But when the road eventually took its turn away from the water and started gently to climb again back into the hills, I began to doubt myself. If I’d not seen a turn-off coming down why on earth would one magically appear going up the other way? Sure enough though, before too long a narrow turn-off did appear, an even rougher donkey road tilting sideways across the downslopes in the direction of what I imagined to be the open throat of the gorge.

And so I went on, all that day, on what turned out to be a rigmarole of a track, trudging this way and that, first back up the slope then switching down through
hairpin bends and dry-locked gullies, some of which were brief but all of which were unpleasant, cut off as they were from the distant hiss of the sea’s motion and therefore laden with an eerie silence.

It was in one of these gullies that I thought I’d come to a hopeless dead end. An enclosed and lonely kind of place, its heavy silence was only sliced with dry reeds rustling occasionally, as if from thirst. At my feet, white skeletons were scattered everywhere - the gully seemed to double as a seabird cemetery - and my boots crunched through these discards as I moved along, frail limbs strewn by vultures or by bleached eddies of the wind. I had no choice but to stop and eat amongst them, feeling suddenly low again, without much energy to continue. I stood chewing, in a rotten mood under the sun, until I could stand it no more. I raised my face to the sky as if to make my final plea and, as it happened, sighted a glancing meander of the track some thirty yards ahead that I hadn’t seen before. Immensely relieved, I went bashing through the hip-high reeds right away, until once again I was treading over the rise and could sight the water, hugging the hill’s parched mouldings arcing east.

I expected to be below the gorge by nightfall and thus to have worked out whether my reckonings of the whereabouts of the village were true, but no such luck. When night came I fell exhausted into a shallow cave on a south-facing hill, worried now that I was stuck in a donkey-track version of the Minoan labyrinth and would never arrive at Arvi. All through the day, the orange clay of the path had taunted me, the bearings of the gorge walls shifting in their proximity, first looming close up as a sure thing, then disappearing altogether behind the hill I toiled around, until when they reappeared they seemed more distant than ever. Whether it was tricks of the ashen sea-light, or illusions of the salt haze which hovered above the track, I still don’t know, but I was tested all that long day through.

Such is the power of our expectations, I s’pose, the way they have of lifting our spirits or disappointing them. Whatever the case, as I rested later, with the car-coat wrapped tight around me in the tiny cave, I felt myself calming down a little at the thought of all I’d been dished up and all I’d survived, and how I’d seen not one bit of it coming. Not one bit.
So the next morning, which dawned even warmer than the day before but with that ashen murk disappeared from the sky above the sea, I set out with the gorge of Arvi not so much as a landmark of my destination but as a reminder. It was Vern himself, who with notions of the mythic past, had cast his mind towards a glorious future, encouraged by all he’d read in Pommy books lionising the Greeks, and by Tiny Freyberg and his fluttering Union Jack, and in a deeper sense bolstered from above and below by the fighting spirit of our mum. But perhaps it was precisely this imagining of a great future that had so disillusioned him in the end. I promised myself that I would only proceed step by step, *patousia me patousia*, and what appeared as my right the day before I accepted now as only my aspiration.
In my recurring dream Lascelles and I are walking along a beach. He is talking, attempting to ferret info out of me, about what happened before we ended up out here, washed up on this island. His mood is urgent but it’s not so much the words he says but the looks he gives me. The concentration in his eyes.

What are the griefs you’ve felt, they ask, what are the horrors you’ve seen?

I walk along in silence for a long time. We go right around the island in fact, for what seems like days, along the sand and over the bluffs and capes, past the shipwrecks and along the abandoned kelp tracks. The wind blows then stills, he walks beside me, but he doesn’t look straight ahead, he’s never watching where he’s going, he’s always looking across at me. I want to say only one thing, to tell him to watch out, that he might trip over, but I don’t. I don’t say a word.

Eventually we make it all the way around the island, right back to the same beach where we started, but when we get there we simply continue. We carry on walking. And it’s then that I begin to speak.

I could tell you, I say, how I endured frostbite and burning sun, I could tell you about the fleas, the screaming Stukas and the blood, the violence of women and priests, and how I stayed in the battle long after it had passed, long after the grey ships had come and let down their scramble nets to take us away. I could describe how, in fact, the battle was far from over at that point, how it never ends, and how I slowly came to realise that, and how I then assembled a new face, with new eyes, a new uniform, a uniform built from the inside out, a ragtag uniform of the nation of the free man, the improvised fighter for freedom.

I could tell you of the consequences of this new uniform too, what it meant in the realities of the occupation, the reckless deeds I performed, as my brother had before me, the ‘heroism’ entailed. And I could tell you how this heroism was actually something more akin to what you’d told me about the Japanese. The way they are prepared to die. In order to live more fully.
But really, I say, as we walk on, none of that would tell you anything. None of it would tell you anything at all.

He looks at me, perplexed, even a little horrified. Over the water a sea eagle circles. A dolphin with a child on its back pushes through the waves.

What I really want, I say then, is for you to tell me. About how your mother died. So that then you can see where it is we are going. We have been travelling round and round in circles all along. Only when you see that, Lascelles, I say, finally, can we be friends.
It was lunchtime as I came into the village – I could tell that not only by my gurgling guts but by the smell of cooking wafting out onto the road as I entered. A few tidy buildings fronted the water, and a little further along I could see two or three masts and the coloured bulk of a couple of caiques straining at their moorings.

It felt unlikely that any German or Italian presence would be in such a remote area but of course I couldn’t entirely trust such a feeling. If what happened next was to take place as I planned – a berth on some seaworthy local boat, or even on one of the RN subs which Spenser’s mates on the wireless from Cairo had months ago mentioned would be searching the south coast – I had to proceed with my wits about me, and with any western district wool well and truly removed from my eyes.

So I trod into the village with great caution. However, just as it had been at the Kavroulakis villa, so it was again. The combination of a Cretan woman and the taste of chicken saw me drop my guard, though this time the woman was neither young nor lithe, but stout, in her eighties, and the chook was already plucked and cooked.

She came scuttling out into the road as I approached, ushering me with vigorous arms into the front downstairs room of a tall rough-plastered building, as if I was the chook rather than the hungry stranger. Her name was Maria she told me and within a few minutes she had me seated at a wooden table in the dark but refreshingly cool room, with a plate of hot steaming chicken and potatoes set in front of me.

At first I didn’t know where to look and, against the growls of my stomach, feigned a firm reluctance. But the sight and smell of the food was too much and, negotiating a temporary surrender with myself, I tucked in, while the black widow, satisfied she’d snared her catch, disappeared through a doorway back into her kitchen.
I sat at the table, looking straight out through a pair of open double doors, down a broken lane silent with sleeping dogs, onto the grey beach and milky blue water of the sea. I ate quickly, huffing through my nose at the pleasure of the food’s taste and heat. When I had finished everything on my plate I sat motionless for a long time, *non compos mentis* after what had been a two-day march across the unforgiving coastal slopes.

Eventually Maria appeared again from the kitchen with coffee and freshly baked bread. She set it down in place of the empty plate, which she removed to a sideboard on the wall, and then sat down opposite me.

‘English, ne?’

‘No, no. Ohi.’

‘Ohi? Ne, you English soldier.’

My motley costume quite obviously didn’t cut the mustard here, my Greek was limited, so I came right out with it.

‘Australian. *Ine* Australian soldier. I need a boat.’

‘Australien. Ne, ne.’

‘I need a boat.’

‘Kaiki?’

‘Ne, a caique, or bigger.’

I stretched an imaginary accordion with my hands, not sure of the word. Maria nodded, smiling with intelligent, almond-shaped eyes. She clapped her brown hands with enthusiasm.

‘*Kaiki,*’ she repeated. ‘*O hios mou. Kremeethia mas.*’

I looked at her, none the wiser.

‘*Ne, ne, kaiki,*’ she stressed, nodding again, full of earnestness. ‘*O hios mou. To kaiki tou kremeethia mas.*’

‘Your son? He has a boat?’

‘*Ne, ne. O hios mou. Kaiki kremeethia mas.*’

I nodded approvingly and she rose from the table, picking up my dirty plate from the sideboard with one hand and motioning with the other for me to stay put while she went off, presumably to find her son.
Alone now on the chair in the black widow’s front room I slumped with a sigh and waited. Perhaps, after so much varying fortune, it was the almost childlike hospitality of certain Cretans that in the end made the greatest impression on me, an impression as indelible as the war itself, for it is certainly true that the two opposing principles: destruction and mercy, are on Crete like the separate braids of a single unbreakable twine. I sat at the table and gave thanks for the welcoming of strangers, reflecting also how this could never be entirely removed from the fear of annihilation. It is in fact a response to annihilation, the best possible response, being both incomparably dignified and strategically practical, for when the day comes for a god to turn up in your own small village, you can bet your bottom dollar he’ll seem like a stranger.

As I sat at the table waiting for Maria to return with her son it was Tassos and Adrasteia that my mind kept returning to. They too were a twining braid, the uncle and the niece, welcoming us as they did into the heart of their house but alert always to their own immediate purpose. Tassos and Adrasteia lived as if all the untidy parables of history were bound into their flesh, as if every day was the subject of a mantinades, every second a chosen word, every minute a familiar melody, every hour a recurring verse, sung or unsung. We would all amount to something, our life is a story we must be proud to tell. When all is done and dusted, I wondered, was this purpose mine as well? Not to die like Vern but to follow the unbreakable braid made from destruction and mercy to the heart of the labyrinth, to slay the beast and then to live to tell the tale? Is that what Tassos and Adrasteia understood, in a way I could never have? Was that a wisdom they were holding as if in safekeeping for me, in safekeeping perhaps for the entire world?

After all, what was I fighting for? My father’s farm? Or was there something before all that, something as ancient as our childhood’s volcano, something frightening but as ordinary as a lemon, which justified their derailing me on the night of the evacuation?

I stared past the sleeping dogs to the sea at the end of the lane. My mother’s face came once more to my mind, so clearly now, more clearly than it had for years. I
saw her lovely brown eyes, the tawny flecks within them, and in that light I saw the way she had sacrificed me, the way she had sacrificed her love for me, so that her husband would have a companion through the trials of his grief. He wouldn’t be alone. None of us would, if Mum had her way.

It was a flawed decision, an impossible situation. We could not all of us sleep in her bed. Only the little one, only the baby.

By the time Maria had returned from searching for her son my tears had dried. The western light was slanting across the dogs in the lane. I had been sitting alone at the table with a glass of water in front of me for hours.
It was a few years after we moved here to Naracoopa that Leonie really started to immerse herself in what is endemic to King. The island celery, the gale-shaped succulents, the wild herbs, the subspecies which have evolved in isolation since the inundation of Bass Strait waters some twelve thousand years ago cut the place off from the mainland. She had an image in her mind of the place before the farms, before the sealers and the skin trade, before the European grass seeds floated up from the shipwrecks, before the abattoirs and before her father’s bulls. The gashes being dozed through the centre of the island for the SS houses only encouraged this vision in her. We had the right amount of land, she told me, in the right spot, and she showed me an engraving a French naturalist made on Napoleon’s ship the *Geographe*, when it moored here in Naracoopa in 1802. Towering blackwoods flourished right down to the shore, in a way that is hardly imaginable today.

Because of the money I’d inherited from the family farm, because of her skill with vegetables and fish, and all the good water here, she had no need to work at the co-op anymore, and having made the break from Nat she had no desire to either. So she began to fossick and search, combing the capes and lagoon lands again as she had as a girl, but this time in search of small tinctures of a past that she was convinced would refresh the future. She set out every which way on those daily field trips, and not always alone, often in fact accompanied by myself, and sometimes, on Sundays, by Lascelles, who could see the merits in her project, intellectually at least, even if he was not the most intrepid of explorers. I think he enjoyed the break from his own preoccupations though, from working the PO and manning the reading room, though it has to be said that Leonie kept the two of us well and truly busy on these forays, digging up roots, bagging plant samples, keeping our eyes peeled for what she may miss. Which in truth was very little.

She brought the handful of old cages she’d got from the Robinsons down to the house too, as with the steady increase of vehicles on the island the rate of injured
animals was growing enormously. It was not so much the deaths that affected
Leonie – in fact, she has been known to scoop up freshly killed wallabies from the
roadside and butcher them up for a stew that very same evening – but the
woundings and shudderings and pain. The suffering.

I look out through the desk window on the thatch of groundcovers she has
created, the spurge and the cudweed, the wort and spinach, the bushy blackwoods
waving gently in the wind along the southern perimeter, the little birds that have
discovered us here over the years since the war due to the unexpected resurrection
of the local plants they prefer. It occurs to me that these local restorations are
Leonie’s own version of this very text, the tiny plants the grammatical units in her
own living statement on the nature of life, loss and recovery.

And so I recall the most important conversation of all we had with Lascelles on
those field trips in search of the old flora. It was Leonie that teased it out of him,
the confession of what a wrench it had been to be dragged as a teenager from the
mainland to help his father run the PO out here. How at sea he felt about both his
mother’s disappearance and his father’s grief. For, as it turns out, she had not died
at all, Mrs Lascelles. She had shot through with another man, without explanation,
and without so much as a goodbye to her gifted and extremely sensitive teenage
son.

They had arrived on King in ’37, the fragile father and son, and like some
common species of periwinkle Lascelles had gone straight into his shell. The
relocation was a much needed fresh start for the father but, initially at least, not the
son. He had been a popular member of a chess club back in Sandringham, he was a
keen scout, he had a small but loyal group of like-minded friends who he now felt
in exile from. So straightaway he associated the island with the winds of
disorientation, and yearned to leave, but he also felt dreadfully beholden, and so
was devastated at the ill-timing of the war when it came. If he had been a little
older, or even had a little more gumption, been a bit more capable of a larrkin’s lie
about his age, he could have escaped from his plight into a uniform. But no, he was
who he was: intelligent, scrupulous, reflective, full of integrity, anxious, and
paralysed by the double dislocation he’d endured, first from his mother and then
from the world that he knew.
We were sitting in the field under the pines by the small lagoon at Pearshape as he spoke of this. I picked at the cheese and peanuts of our picnic, drank a beer, and said not a word. Not a word about the mother I had lost, not a word about the duty I’d felt to my own dad. Not a word about the damage that had been done, the things we had in common.

Later on that night, after the Velocette had whined its way up the hill to cross the island back to Currie, Leonie said to me when we were getting ready for bed:

‘You know, Wes, I’d never realised. Not until today. He sympathises so much with what you blokes went through because of what he was going through himself. His thing about the war has nothing really to do with the fact that he just missed out.’

The potency of Leonie’s words hung in the bedroom long after we turned off the light. We lay there the two of us, hand in hand, listening to the frogs, the wind and sea, and thinking I’m sure the same thoughts. That none of us have eyes in the back of our heads or a clear view into our own being. And that this was the deep unsolvable knot, the true labyrinth, not so much a tangible thing but a feeling thing, a thinking thing, a darkness interweaving with the light.

Lascelles and Leonie and I were just different facets of the same refracting shard. It was only I that was the returned soldier, only I that could command the official sympathy and the national applause, but we were all in the same situation. We were islands of the same archipelago, adrift in a sea of unknowing.

*

The following Sunday after the one by the lagoon at Pearshape, Lascelles’ father had taken ill and was admitted to the hospital. Needless to say, Lascelles didn’t make it out to us that week but by the next Sunday when he did come I’d already made up my mind.

We had a normal enough day out at Sea Elephant, gathering bait from the mudflats there and enjoying each other’s company. But when we made it back to the house and were sitting in the dining room with cups of tea and scones I began casually enough.
I was sitting up at the kitchen table, the newspaper spread in front of me. Lascelles was on the couch with his pipe and a book. Leonie was standing, with her hair cut newly short, by the window as if in anticipation, as if she already knew, as if she could already read the situation, staring out onto her garden and the sea.

‘You know,’ I said. ‘There’s an article here in the paper, about whether or not cats can swim. I saw cats on a beach once. Lots of them. Back in ’42.’

There was a pause, outside not a breath of wind.

‘Yairs, I was on the south coast of Crete. In a village I didn’t know the name of. I was alone. I’d had an awful time and was waiting for a boat to get me off and back to my unit in Egypt.’

Leonie remained motionless by the window. It was as if she, like the ocean outside, was holding her breath. On the couch Lascelles didn’t dare look up, or puff on his pipe, or even move.
She came with a younger woman, and a small girl, also a tortoiseshell kitten. The girl played with the kitten on the floor while Maria and her daughter-in-law, Athina, a blonde woman of about thirty with a large gap between the two front teeth of her smile, sat down at the table to say that the son could not be found. Athina had better English than Maria and she said the word had been put out and that I should wait with them until the following day when she was sure her husband would come. She told me with a fond smirk that this husband of hers could not sit still, he had been in America she said, before the war, in Chicago. She pronounced it Chicagee. He had made money yes, but he could not sit still.

‘So he will come tomorrow,’ Athina said, and then, in a lowered voice, ‘his English is good and he knows what to do.’

I was shown upstairs to a small room with a painted stone floor, a divan, a mirror on the wall above a single rush chair, and a painted blue window with a view of the sea. Maria set a pottery jug of water on a low table beside the bed alongside a wooden cup. She unlatched the window, pushed it out and the sound of the sea flooded in. Then she smiled graciously and left.

Only a few minutes later I heard voices and Athina and the girl came up the stairs to tell me where I could wash. The kitten ran in between their legs where they stood in the doorway and flipped itself onto the divan. Athina laughed and the girl, Zoe, threw herself after the kitten and swept it into her thin arms.

‘Efharisto,’ I said. ‘Does it have a name?’

But Zoe was too shy to answer. She stood up from the divan with the kitten writhing in her arms and went to stand behind her mother’s skirts.

‘The cat has no name yet,’ Athina explained, laughing. ‘Maybe tomorrow. If my husband comes, we will name her.’
I nodded. Athina told me what the washing arrangements were and that the washtub was behind her mother-in-law’s kitchen downstairs. We stood in silence for a brief, awkward moment.

‘Athina,’ I said. ‘Is it safe for me here to wash in the sea? To swim, is there any danger?’

‘Danger?’ She clicked her tongue knowingly. ‘Italians, no. Not yet,’ she said. ‘They are only near . . . up there.’ She tossed her head back, towards the massif. ‘But Germans will come.’

‘Yes. I see,’ I replied, thinking she’d misunderstood the question. ‘But danger from the sea?’ she went on. ‘Yes, so it is best for you to swim today.’ ‘It is?’ ‘Yes. Tomorrow there will be white lambs.’ ‘White lambs?’ ‘Ne. On the water. The wind is coming.’ ‘Uh, I see. Thank you, Athina. Efharisto, Zoe.’

The little girl dug deep into her mother’s folds and the kitten squirmed. Laughing again, Athina prised herself free of the two of them and said goodbye with the smiling gap in her teeth. I was left in the room alone.

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On the grey sand there were many cats, some patting at the waves with their paws, some just slinking about in the salt hiss. Others went running along the beach with smiles on their faces, like I’d never seen cats run before, they were more like dogs in fact, and had an air of perfect ease and happiness about them.

There was no one else on the beach bar the cats and an old fella laying out nets down near the moorings. Even so, I felt conspicuous as I unwrapped the cummerbund of my costume and stripped off to my underwear. If nothing else my dog tags were a dead giveaway and for the first time in over two years I pulled them free of my neck and over my head, and quickly tucked them away amongst the pile of clothes.
The ashen sand was like coarse dark screenings once you were on it. The waves were small but dumping and hard to negotiate. It took me a while but eventually I got out beyond them where the milky water went slack.

I stood with water shoulder high and looked back on the village: just a sparse gathering of buildings with what looked like a small quarry on a hill behind, surrounded by sun-bleached grass and bare rock, purple thistleheads, and eventually the sage-green groves leading back up to the towering slopes. I could see no sign of the walls of the gorge however, and realised that I wasn’t even sure whether this village I’d struck upon was Arvi at all. It wouldn’t matter, as long as Maria’s son could do something for me.

From where I stood in the water I could still see snow high up on the top of the massif and now at the sight of it I became suddenly stupefied by how Andreas had invented his version of John Pendlebury in an attempt to capitalise on my disillusion. I shuddered, chilled to the bone by how elaborate human subterfuge could be. Then my thoughts jerked, not from the memory of the shots ringing out in the monastery, but from Simmo, whose hacked-at carcass would no doubt be shredded now by the vultures. I’d slaughtered beasts on Corangamite from the age of twelve, sheep and chooks and rabbits, skinks and fish even earlier than that, and went most days to school with dried blood between my fingers. But none of them had been a friend like him. From the sea in front of the village that freezing mill at the top of the island felt about as far away as the moon. But also so close.

I turned away from the land with a grimace and, lying on my back to float on the water, looked up to see, like a broken wafer of ice, the daylight moon propped on the air in the silence of the sky.

I closed my eyes, heard the metallic sparks of the underwater, the fire in the sea, as the currents edged above my ears. I had thoughts of the layout of the ship. Rivets, tight metal corridors, hard steps and mountings. The spaces of its going down. And down it went, again, for the millionth time since May, away and forever . . .
The next day rose windless, despite Athina’s prediction of white lambs. I awoke to an empty house but to talking in the lane below. I knew that in all likelihood I would be the subject of the discussion, the stranger who’d come from the battle in search of a kaiki. All it would take would be one treasonous bastard to get on the end of such chat and I’d be stuffed. Inexplicably though, I felt no tension at the thought. I lay back on my pillows, sipping at the water Athina had left by my cot, staring through the window at the perfect sky. Before long I had drifted back to sleep, dreaming of Sarah Murtagh with a gap in her teeth, swimming in the Libyan sea.

When I woke later and went downstairs I found that in the place of Athina’s ‘white lambs’ the outside of the house was being whitewashed for Easter. Old Maria and a paper-thin younger man, another of her sons, were hard at it in the lane. At the sight of me the widow dropped what she was doing and once again ushered me back inside, urging me to sit again at the table and calling in a bright shriek for Athina as she hurried back towards the kitchen.

Soon an omelette was brought, more bread, an orange juice, and Athina was sitting opposite me, explaining how she’d still not heard from her husband.

‘But we will protect you,’ she said. ‘We will protect you . . . and one day soon he will come.’

One day soon . . .

Was it just her English or was I a chance to be stuck in this village for weeks? The Maori in the bathtub came to mind, how he’d been happily holed up and how the same fate may now be awaiting me. At least in my case I knew, however, that the man from Chicagee wasn’t that far away. I had seen him, hadn’t I, with my own eyes, deep in conversation near that hovel when I first descended to the coast? And anyway, if it came to it, there were boats down along the beach at the moorings, there’d be comings and goings. I wasn’t high and dry in a fastness of the hills.

Athina left me alone and I polished off the omelette and bread. Then sipped at the juice. What would be my plan? How long would I wait for the man from Chicagee to show up? One day? A week? These were the thoughts in my head as, for the first time in months, I took out my army diary and began to write a few things down.
Out in the lane, I could hear the whitewash being slopped on as I scribbled away. No matter what happened, this was going to be a different Easter to the last one we’d had up at Vevi. From the kitchen Athina reappeared, put down a coffee and took away my empty plate. I wrote:

It’s a part of me now, the constant change. Those classical yarns they made us learn by rote at school, which V took upon himself back on the lake, have finally been digested. Perhaps after all it’s just my fate to quietly understand, not to wear my knowledge like a crown. I live not in peace but in my own skin.
Over a long southern winter of Sundays I told Lascelles the whole story. Not, as I said to him, the story you will read elsewhere, in books like that bloke Noonan’s, not the story about the two and a half years I spent half-wild with fearlessness, making life hell for the Germans from the strongholds in the hills, driving them mad in tandem with the SOE and the andartes networks. Not that story, nor about how we were finally picked up in early ’45, semi-mythical figures by then, in an RN sub off the south coast at Lendas; how we were slapped on the back, fed cocoa and sandwiches, and then eventually pardoned back in Alex for all our primitive excesses, our all-it-takes methods of subterfuge and survival. No, not that story of derring-do, but what came before.

When he was finally able to believe his luck that I was actually talking, Lascelles was enormously respectful. But the sad thing is I never told him how grateful I was to him. For that day years before, back in the hotel, when he proposed his theory about my aching tooth. He had loosened the bitterness in me but how could I suggest that he himself had ignored his own pain in order to lessen the likes of my own?

Yes, as it turns out that was harder for me to say than anything else in the end, though I do like to think that he understood that by filling him in I was also expressing my gratitude.

Even so, I would have liked to be able to actually return the favour, to actually say the words while he was alive, rather than to rely on interpretation and implication.

Leonie of course didn’t necessarily need to hear it all again. She was glad nevertheless that I had made the decision and on the Sunday I told him about the snipping of Spenser’s moustache in the cave above Tzermiado I remember her saying to Lascelles that it was just a shame it wasn’t all still in writing, so he could place it in his archive as a kind of number one ticketholder of the stories that he
stored there. When she said this a little light came on in my mind. But I said nothing at the time, and what with one thing and another it’s taken me till now, with Lascelles six foot under on Wait-a-While, to get it all down on paper at last.

*

Like old Nat Fermoy and Patsy Ballyhoura, who bunkered down amongst the westerlies at Yellow Rock without so much as a promissory note for the land, it never seemed to worry anyone on King when Leonie and I shacked up without a wedding certificate. By the 1950s, with a new wind blowing, people in Currie or Grassy were even referring occasionally to Leonie as my wife, so glad were they that she had finally escaped from her father’s perpetual storm cloud. They sensed, partly it has to be said from gossip and innuendo, how much effort that would have taken, and perhaps they reasoned that a coupling such as ours demanded more than the usual commitment, official, ceremonious, or otherwise.

It has done me no harm on the island to be hitched to its favourite child. My early identity as the flinty recluse began gradually to change into something with the glowing hint of salvation about it. Like the next-day light on the western spits after a genuine dune-lashing storm. There was a view that somehow I had saved Leonie from Nat but also there was a decided feeling, I think, that she had saved me. People became cheerier when I bumped into them and, as if by reflection, I became a little more agreeable to them too. And as the years rolled by the chances of any off-the-cuff remark to do with the war lessened, and therefore, from my point of view, so did the social risk of blowing my top.

At about the time I started relating my story to Lascelles, Leonie and I had taken to getting out a bit more, going to the odd footy match, and now and then to see a special visitor spruik in town. It was a benefit I didn’t see coming, but with my saying my piece, Lascelles’d got a new purposefulness about him with respect to the memorial, an extra relish that finally seemed to be bearing some fruit. I don’t know if they ever knew that he financed the completion of the reading room with his own money but, whatever the case, people on the island, some of the SS included, suddenly seemed to take a bit of an interest in his collection, and at some point
around that time he even had a letter from the national president of the RSL, who'd heard about his work, and seemed more than impressed. A few years later Lascelles was invited as a kind of advisor to the national shrine in Canberra when they were reorganising the archive of family documents to do with the war and I ribbed the hell out of him about it. Leonie and I were both very happy for him though, and he knew that, I think, despite the jibes.

It was during those years that Lascelles became somewhat of a celebrity on the island, insofar as his name occasionally popped up in the pages of the mainland or Tasmanian press, either as a correspondent or as someone whose opinion was worth quoting on the subject of military history or commemoration. He had also become the popular mainstay of the island Literary & Debating Society, who began conducting their meetings from the Memorial Reading Room. Very occasionally Leonie and I would venture over to attend one of these gatherings. One I remember was to do with the writings of George Bernard Shaw, a subject which caused some earnest debate between the Presbyterians and the Catholics; and another talk was on the Hungarian Revolution. This Hungarian meeting was noteworthy, being spiced up by the attendance of a solo Yugoslavian sailor, who was moored in Currie harbour at the time and who, despite his pretty rough English, walked up and over the hill to contribute plenty of interesting information to the debate. Not all of it was anti-communist either, so that was one of the more controversial evenings held by the society.

Leonie knew better than to suggest that I, given my Catholic education and my love of reading, could contribute a little more than I was to this Literary & Debating Society. But when Lascelles informed us one Sunday that they had a man coming over from Melbourne to give a talk on underwater archaeology, with particular reference to Greece and the Mediterranean, she really had to bite her tongue. I felt the question hanging in the air, as Lascelles spoke of how interesting the talk would be. Apparently they had discovered ships from the Bronze Age under the sea near Crete, he said. And, more recently of course, there were important discoveries being made about ships that went down during the war, some of which there'd been no record of until now. Of course he knew better by then than to push for my attendance but I could feel nevertheless that that was what he
hoped for. Which even then, even that late in the day, made my hackles rise. Because the implication was that I should attend. Would I or wouldn’t I come along, he seemed to be asking. Definitely not, was my silent answer. I think of that incident now as a relapse of sorts but even so I am overwhelmed by my own weakness. We have to work at being human, don’t we?

Why, in the end, couldn’t I have gone? I could have broached the subject with this visiting expert, perhaps I could have even initiated some investigation into the whereabouts of certain soldiers lost on the HMS *Imperial* when it was sunk by its own navy on 29 May 1941.

Alas, even then, with my new sociability, and with all I had got off my chest to Leonie and then to Lascelles, I could not face exposing my story to such a public arena. Leave me alone, I wanted to cry out, all over again. Just leave me alone.

It was still a raw nerve that had been touched, an underwater nerve that I’ll never entirely be rid of I’m sure. And as I went walking out to the jetty on my own that night I remember sighing deeply at the truth that no matter how far out you go, no matter how many miles from the scenes of your distress, even if you settle at the other end of the earth, the ghosts that trouble you will always be there. Like the moon and stars in the sky.

As it turns out the visit from the marine archaeologist was cancelled due to his plane not being able to take off from Essendon in high winds. It was never rescheduled. But it was not long after that when, perhaps needing to further shore up my defences, or better put, needing to quarry the last vestiges of bitterness from my trembling soul, I proposed to Leonie and she accepted my hand in marriage.
When I had been in Maria’s house for over a week and the man from Chicagee still hadn’t shown, late one afternoon I climbed up the stairs at the back of the kitchen to take a nap. Through the open window of my room the sea breeze had a soothing quality about it, a light feathering of the skin that seemed to penetrate deep into me. I recalled the same sensation from Iraklio before the brollies. I slept easy.

When I woke the breeze had dropped and it felt like it was getting on to evening. I got a little shock as I stood looking at myself in the mirror that hung over the bed. Once again I looked different. Had my eyes become less green in the last few months? It certainly seemed that way. There were the faintest flecks now, of the brown like Mum’s. Perhaps this was hazel, I wondered.

On my way downstairs I could hear Zoe and the kitten playing in the yard. Athina was bent over in the open door of Maria’s oven. She straightened up as she heard me, turned, her cheeks flushed from the heat. Smiling apologetically, she raised her palms upwards in a gesture of no luck. Well, at least not yet.

‘And the white lambs?’ I asked, a little in jest.

She laughed, showing the gap again between her teeth. ‘Tomorrow,’ she said. ‘It will all come tomorrow.’

Wandering down past the sleeping dogs, I made my way back onto the beach. I stood marvelling at the cats on the sand again as I slowly stripped off and left my clothes in a pile.

Out past the dumpers I floated on my back, feeling the currents on my skin, smelling the salt, listening again to the underwater in my ears. I looked straight up at the sky: it was pale, pale as a candle with the day’s tapering off. I closed my eyes.

I drifted, past the jagged curtain of blood falling amongst the oleanders in the lane above the Kavroulakis villa, past the jolting of the monk’s body as slugs from Spenser’s revolver threw him back and back again into that bed on the third terrace. Where was the revolver? I wondered briefly. Amongst my clothes. Was it
safe? Abruptly, I tipped myself upright in the sea, looked back at the beach, scanned for the pile, found it, and remembered. My dog tags I’d hidden there, the revolver was in the room, with my kit. I scanned the buildings now until I recognised the one. The tall one, Maria’s, its front wall half whitewashed, with lilacs blooming beside my open window on the upper story.

It was too late now. Too late to do anything. And so I thought fondly of the little girl, Zoe, and the kitten, the one without the name, the gap in Athina’s teeth . . .

I leant back, floating again, reassured. Went through that gap in her teeth and saw the mirror image of my old eyes, my mother’s eyes. Just because the damage has occurred do we have to make it our only caper? Can we not believe again, for the first time in fact, that what has happened can be redeemed?

I was an ordinary man, cut adrift in the weight of life, but I could feel my buoyancy as I floated there, my body light on the water at last. I was in no need of a boat, not yet, and I had the first glimmers of understanding of what my fighting would be all about. An island should not be stolen, nor could it ever float away. And I? I would do things my own way. I would not be transformed into breathless myth, not like Pendlebury, not like Vern.
We didn’t want a lot of fuss on the day, nor could we have mustered it. But she was, of course, in a lot of people’s minds, a pride of the island, and thus it seemed only right to allow them to pay their respects.

So we arranged to have a little service in the church in Currie, with Don Lawson the priest flown over from Smithton in Tassie to officiate. But as the day approached a couple of questions loomed large. Firstly, whether or not Nat Fermoy would be invited. Leonie hadn’t even mentioned this issue until I brought it up when things were getting close and we were driving across the island to speak to the church secretary, Eveline Aspinall, about the proceedings. Leonie’s reaction was firm and instant. She would continue to take him food and wash his clothes but her father would not be there on the day.

Uncle True, however, was not such a clear-cut issue. Since Leonie’s retrieval of the memory of what her father had done to her, she hadn’t been able to bring herself to go see True. It was not that she resented the fact that he’d held this information close to his chest all these years, leaving her in that house and in danger as a child, it was more that she didn’t want to embarrass him. But she wanted him at the wedding, she said, in fact she wanted him to give her away.

We agreed that I would go and see him. I turned up at the old house at Yellow Rock one Tuesday morning with the weather beating a harry from the south pole, the wind and swell absolutely castigating the spits and beaches. The house was batten fast, a round-shouldered timber creature with its head down, and when I knocked on the door I had to hold onto the jamb so as not to be blown over. I half expected no one to answer, such was the noise in the sky and the corresponding shut-away feeling the old Fermoy shack had about it.

But sure enough the door did open and there stood True, in a faded flannelette shirt and workpants, his white hair sticking out at all angles, with an empty kitchen
pot in his hand. Without saying hello he gestured me in quickly out of the wind and shut the door behind us.

The shack was sealed tight and immediately the volume of the world was reduced to just the quiet hum of a fridge.

We greeted each other now that it was safe enough to do so and True ushered me into the large westerly room where once I had watched him nod off into his toddy after a long day’s gurrying. I found the room as shining and spick as it had always been, its old sheoak timbers glowing brown and the kitchen still tightly organised as a ship’s. Once again the contrast of this houseproudness with the dishevelled state of True himself was startling.

It seemed that despite the hour – roughly ten o’clock in the morning – he had already availed himself of a claret or two. I couldn’t remember him ever drinking anything but rum but the evidence was plain now, the drinker’s disciplines had disassembled, the half-finished bottle of plonk was on the table.

We sat down and he offered me one. ‘Would you take a drink, Wesley?’ he said. ‘We can toast your courage.’

His mouth curled in amusement, his eyes laden with the layers of the joke.

‘I will have a splash, True,’ I replied. ‘But not if you persist with being a smartarse about it.’

The old bloke smiled broadly and got up to fetch me a glass. As he shuffled back across the glowing boards, polishing the glass with a tea towel, he said: ‘Aw but seriously. I’ve no trouble with ya pinchin’ my niece. I only wished I saw the two of you more often.’

He poured the glass with the steady hand of mid morning.

‘Yair, well, we don’t get over this side too often, True. Need a bloody suit of armour to live over here.’

He told me that that’s what his brother Nat always reckoned.

I sipped at the claret and, as True started to speak at length about the art of living on the west side, I wondered how on earth I was gonna broach the subject. Not so much of the wedding but of what came before.

I listened as he rambled on about what he’d learnt from Harry Grave, a hunter who lived further up the west coast when he was a boy. Eventually, when a gap
appeared in his talk, I skirted round the main issue of why it was me sitting at the table and not his niece, and just invited him straight out.

‘She wants you to give her away,’ I told him. ‘At our wedding. Her father won’t be there.’

True brought his fingers to his lips. He toyed with them there for a good while. He took another sip of the claret. Then he grimaced like he had a stitch and shook his head.

‘No,’ he said. ‘I couldn’t do it.’

‘Why not?’

‘Just . . . couldn’t.’

I took a breath. I waited. Slowly I began to hear the roar of the wind outside above the hum of the fridge.

‘Well actually, True,’ I said at last, ‘There’s no one else. She wants it to be you. And she’s done enough time fending for herself on this island. I reckon she needs an elbow to lean on as she comes down the aisle. What do you think her mother would say?’

I don’t know what got into me. I just blurted that question out as if it wasn’t my body the words were coming from. I was as shocked as he was.

Perhaps his hackles did rise for a second at this interloper telling him what’s what about poor beautiful Alma Burrows who’d birthed the child and died in the very room we sat. But immediately they went down again. He gave me a strange look, a sizing look, he was taking fresh stock of me and I saw in his face the notion arrive that a soldier like me must have done some pretty terrible things while I was away, some ruthless things a long, long way from home, some things that couldn’t have been avoided and that needed being done.

It was respect I saw in those old rheumy eyes, and for once it was of some use to me. He got the picture. I wouldn’t be sitting in his kitchen speaking on behalf of his dead sister-in-law unless I meant business.

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The day of the wedding itself was unusually picturesque. A day for real estate salesmen and postcard makers. Even the west coast was blithe and royal blue, the water rolling gently up to paddocks that looked like the fairways of a links golf course. If you didn’t know better you would have thought the whole place had its best duds on for the occasion.

Lascelles was my best man but his main and rather daunting job was to make sure True got to the church in one piece. ‘I don’t care if you forget the ring,’ I told him. ‘Just so long as her uncle’s waiting for her on the steps when she arrives.’

Rose Robinson was the maid of honour, the eldest the island had ever known. Certainly the first one to use a stick. But despite her grey curls she seemed as sweetly innocent as any of them that day. She cried all the way through the service too and people told me later she was bawling even when Leonie and her first arrived at the church in the back of Bill Murray’s convertible.

I stood alone at the head of the aisle with only Don Lawson, the priest, for company. He was a good bloke, Don. We talked about how smooth his flight was in from Smithton, and he told me how the pilot had said the weather was that calm he could have landed on the church spire. ‘A great day to get married anyway, Wesley. The gods are shining on you today.’

I’ll always remember that comment from Don Lawson, the way he used the plural gods like that, and with him meant to be officiating as a monotheist priest and all.

We weren’t too long chatting at the top of the aisle before I heard the whine of Lascelles’ Velocette outside and heard the sound of him and True talking as they stepped up into the porch of the church. They sounded like they were getting on fine. I was safe. Any minute now she would clap eyes on her troubled old uncle and the two of them would be walking arm in arm towards me. I had never given any thought to marriage or a wedding day but as I stood there with Don Lawson arranging his vestments beside me I felt that such a ceremony had its role to play. Well, maybe not for everyone but at least in our case.

She came down the aisle that day, and dressed in white, her hair cut short and her eyes with that wise old smirk about them. We kissed in public, would you
believe, and when the service was over we went as arranged to the pub for a meal in the dining room. No speeches allowed. Our stipulation. To save any awkwardness.

As for a honeymoon, well, we thought briefly about Melbourne but didn’t bother, though I’d say we’ve had the longest one ever here at Naracoopa. We’ve waged our wars all right, achieved some moments of peace, and we travel on knowing full well that the world will also travel on, far beyond us, and that like the Bass Strait weather it will have no influence or regard to any children of ours. Problems hover above us for a time but like the lenticular the next moment we look up and they have gone.

I leave the breakfast table of a morning and know that this is right. That we have more than enough living to reflect upon. And Leonie, in her garden slicker the colour of the red heath, and her worn-out gloves, with plant samples trailing from her pockets, takes her cup and plate to the sink as I go, and calls after me, only half in jest: ‘It can never be true as the original, you know, never as true as the pages you wrote in my cuddle-ink.’

I take the path to the bungalow. Pen in hand. She may indeed be right but I console myself that neither Lascelles, nor any of the future visitors to his Memorial Reading Room, where today I will deposit this manuscript into the safe hands of the archive, will ever be any the wiser.
Coda

Ampliphone XI - thaark thurr boonea

(please click on above title to view video)

Thaark Thurr Boonea - written, filmed & performed by Gregory Day in 2014, takes this ‘PhD By Prior Publication’ full circle. It was inspired by the giant eel trap seen in this film, which was in turn inspired by the remarkable aquaculture technologies of the aboriginal people of southwest Victoria, Australia. The trap was made by my brother Peter Day and sits now on our 21st century riverflat here in Mangowak. Thaark Thurr and Boonea, - reed, dew and eel - are three phonetic spellings in English from the Wadawurrung language. This language has been spoken for millenia here in the inlet, and also in the surrounding landscapes of Wadawurrung country. Mangowak is the southwestern border of that country. The Wadawurrung tongue is nowadays endangered and its revitalisation is connected in my mind not only with coming to a deeper understanding of the place where I live but also as part of our response to the mindless ravages of man-made climate change. Thus the inclusion of Thaark Thurr Boonea in my Ampliphone series of video-song-poems on that subject.

‘i could reign like a king, but i’d rather be the rain....’