‘Windsong’

Place, Memory and Stories in Australian Literature

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This thesis is presented for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy at Murdoch University, Perth, 2015.
DECLARATION

I declare that this dissertation is my own account of my research and contains as its main content work that has not previously been submitted for a degree at any tertiary education institution.

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ABSTRACT

The production and transmission of stories, whether oral or written, is essential in the making and holding of collective memory. Stories become especially important to communities that have been displaced, where familiar places have been degraded, or even destroyed. At the same time as landscapes are shifting geographically and culturally, memory is implicated in public discourses that endorse forgetting. If we are to nurture and value our histories and collective memories, the connections between words and places are a vital aspect of story making. In considering then the importance of this interconnectedness of language with both place and memory, I draw on applicable philosophical research and, through a novella and five case studies of contemporary novels, examine representations of the landscape in Australian culture.

The dissertation comprises an exegesis and a creative work that function together to re-imagine place through multiple points of view and multiple voices. My novella ‘Windsong’ offers an account of the tension between emplacement and remembering, and is deeply concerned with the cultural construction of landscape, collective amnesia, and how memories of the past become central to the identities of the characters and their sense of belonging and loss.

Working in tandem with the explorations of memory and landscape in ‘Windsong’, the case studies in the exegetical component of the dissertation analyze the features of literary imaginative world-frames, paying particular attention to how cultural memory is, as Edward Casey describes it, emplaced (1993, 31), and how both memory and cultural identity are formed and maintained through narrative. Frequently bound up in representations of the landscape, much Australian writing points to a sense of exile, with the natural environment commonly figuring as a threat to be conquered or possessed. The exegesis draws on a range of texts that offer rich ground for the examination of the praxis of place in Australian writing, including consideration of the ways in which the preoccupations of the European colonizers have become embedded in many contemporary literary representations of the Australian landscape, and how the representation of place in storytelling might manifest through the interactions of both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal writers engaging in intercultural dialogue. This dissertation draws attention to a growing interest within Australian literary studies in writing at the borders and margins of homelands, and argues that the inseparable nature and intrinsic liminality of place and memory presents storytellers with possibilities for re-imagined landscapes expressed through a multiplicity of co-existing voices.
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I have appreciated the contact with other students through MUPSA, The Loopers Creative Writing Group and in particular, the Albany Postgraduate Group who shared ‘happy moments’ as well as some of the lows in our ‘external’ ‘regional’ postgraduate journeys.

During several fieldtrips to the Gascoyne region I visited the Gwoonwardu Mia Aboriginal Heritage and Cultural Centre in Carnarvon. The centre is situated in Yinggarda country and supports five Aboriginal language groups. While it was impossible for me to interact with people from each group, through an introduction from mutual friends, I have had conversations with the Manager of the Baiyungu Aboriginal Corporation, Mr Paul Baron, and Baiyungu elder, Mrs Gwen Peck, to outline my intentions in writing the novella. I am especially grateful for the Jillian Bradshaw Scholarship awarded by the wonderful Graduate Women’s Association WA, and a small grant from MUPSA that made the fieldtrips possible. I also appreciate the financial assistance I have received from Murdoch University to attend several inspirational interstate conferences.
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AUTHOR’S NOTE

Windsong is set in a fictional town in the Gascoyne region of north-west Western Australia, and all of Windsong’s characters are fictional. However, I do make reference to some historical and political figures associated with the time and place outlined in the narrative, and in some instances, reference real towns and buildings. The sense of place, including representations of the characters, derives from living and working for nearly two decades in the Kimberley region of Western Australia and the Anangu Pitjantjatjara Lands of South Australia, and many years holidaying on the north-west coast.

I took the names for the characters in the story Frankie tells in the chapter “Fire” from Far From Home: Aboriginal Prisoners of Rottnest Island, 1838-1931 (1997). Frankie’s story was inspired by an account of a massacre told to me by a senior woman at Pukatja, on the Anangu Pitjantjatjara Lands, as part of the first Sorry Day held on 26th May 1997. Since that time I have come across accounts of such massacres and the burning of bodies to conceal evidence in a variety of sources. These include Mitch Torres film, Whispering in Our Heart (2001) that traces the 1916 Mowla Bluff massacre in the Kimberley, and in Yammatji: Aboriginal Memories of the Gascoyne (1992). This collection is a useful source of stories of the early contact period between the Aboriginal groups and pastoralists of the Gascoyne region. [Note: Throughout the novella, I have employed the commonly used spelling Yamatji].

Any reference to the Rev. John Gribble was taken from his 1905 pamphlet, Dark Deeds in a Sunny Land, including the Introduction by Bob Tonkinson and essay by Su-Jane Hunt included in the re-published 1987 volume.

Inspiration for the anti-uranium mining stance has come in part from the work of Ngalia elder Kado Muir (applicant for Mantjintjarra Ngalia peoples native title claim near Leonora in the W.A. Goldfields), and his family and associates. Over many decades they have opposed the Yeelirrie uranium mine and continue to lead walks through country to draw attention to their custodial obligations to the land.

Over many years I have encountered texts and creative productions that relate to the concerns of the novella. These are far too many to name, but a good example is Trevor Jamieson and Scott Rankin’s

An abiding interest in the communities of Central Australia and the north-west regions of Western Australia has brought me into contact with the people who live there. I have listened to their stories and learnt so much from their exceptional knowledge and wisdom as well as their generosity of spirit. Their willingness to share their lives and help me to understand is gratefully acknowledged.
Windsong

2015
Keep going or turn back. The vehicle moves soundlessly, the bitumen stretching forward. Even if she could, why would she? Go back to what?

When it is her aunt’s turn to drive, Caly stares out, silently retracing the landmarks of the trips she made years earlier. Travelling north, away from the suburbs sprawling along the coast, her spirits are lifting. There’s freedom in following the road. She doesn’t have to think about where she is going; just follow the road.

Low, grey scrub. Buildings impermanent and inconsequential. It makes her smile. Out here, even after all these years, there’s so little to show. On other continents cities evolved layer upon layer, over centuries, time marked in architecture rather than the age rings of trees and the strata of rocks. But these rural backblocks, the long stretches of degraded farmland, the people huddling on the fragile coast like frightened sheep. Transient. Futile. Why does development come hand in hand with destruction? Why so ugly?

In the early hours of yesterday she had flown out of New York City, that wholly man-made place. The contrasts; it could be her next film. The camera taking in the scene, and then there she is standing, no, not standing, sitting in the vehicle; that’s what people do in these places, insulate themselves in their vehicles as they drive through. She addresses the audience: Here it’s different. The people who live out here have long ago learned to expect little, here nothing is built to last. One strong wind and it’ll all be gone. The primeval temporal order still prevails. Time measured in the enduring natural landscape. The camera pans slowly, as if searching for life in the deserted plain, then back to her. There is no illusion of civilisation. Indeed, it’s possible, driving through this desolate landscape, to imagine that the presence of people could only be fleeting.

‘I’d forgotten the dryness of the heat,’ she tells her aunt when they climb back into the vehicle after refuelling. ‘From below zero and snow in New York to fifty degrees here. There’s not a drop of moisture in the air.’

‘I thought you’d had record high temperatures?’ Cynthia says.

‘Of course, frighteningly warmer, but unpredictable. When I left yesterday it was snowing heavily.’

‘You’ve heard the old adage. Confucius say, The soul travels as fast as a donkey.’ Cynthia glances at her niece. ‘I don’t like flying anymore. At least with a car there’s time to adapt. In a plane you’re plonked down in a completely different place.’

‘I love that! The soul travels as fast as a donkey,’ Caly says. ‘Though I’ve ridden on donkeys
that hurtled along, especially on the home stretch.’ That was three years ago and it feels like yesterday. Even here, with almost twenty thousand kilometres between them, he’s still there, in her thoughts. The smell of cypress, of smokey fires and wet wool, the smell of him. On Santorini, she and Vin had pushed the donkeys, urged them on. Those first days when all they wanted was to be in bed with each other. Those first days that she can’t allow herself to remember. What’s the point of leaving him, then travelling half way across the world, if she brings the memories with her?

‘Immediacy and speed. I’m all for it.’ She tries to make her voice light. ‘Who wants to plod along on a bad-tempered donkey? This time yesterday a city of millions– to this.’ She opens her arms to the vast expanse of dirt and vegetation that is broken only by the bitumen strip. ‘No highrise, scarcely a car in sight.’ It’s true, since they’ve left the city of Geraldton there’s been little traffic.

‘This time of the year’s too hot for travelers,’ Cynthia says. ‘But the Germans and Japanese, the Koreans turn up to watch the whale sharks in a few weeks. Dammit, look at that, there must be a good hundred in that mob.’ Cynthia waves a hand in the direction of a large herd of feral goats. ‘There may not be many people but there must be a few thousand goats, sheep, kangaroos and emus. Do they count?’

‘Not quite,’ Caly laughs. ‘Even if you rounded up every animal here I doubt it would match the numbers that travelled with me on the subway each day.’

‘I can’t bear to think of it.’ Cynthia eases out to pass a long-haul truck.

‘No shortage of trucks,’ Caly says. ‘You really don’t fly anymore? I wondered why you wanted to make this trip by car, such a huge distance.’

‘I’m used to it, Caly. I couldn’t count how many times I’ve done it. And I’m not over the hill yet, I can still drive.’

‘I’ve done so little driving lately. Never in the cities and if I am out on location, there’s always a team to do the driving.’

‘I don’t know how you could stand it, living like that, all jammed in together. I’ve spent too much of my life in the bush. I’d go stark raving mad.’ Cynthia looks out at the landscape; the formation of the rocks, the line of the hills, the relentless sun and heavy air, the low vegetation clinging to the soil. Most people look out from their passing cars and see nothing, but she never tires of it.

‘You get used to the crowds,’ Caly says, thinking of those long winter months, prisoner of the cold and the dark, longing for the crunch of dry sand under her feet, the luminous sea, the golden light; dreaming of warm breezes on sunbaked skin. She must have been mad to stay. ‘Apart from the first few years when I was making the films, doing my research, I was shut up in a city of concrete and cars. It’s a long time since I’ve seen the horizon.’
'Seven years,' says Cynthia. ‘Not that I’m counting.’

‘Well, here I am.’ Caly throws a fragment of smile. Home again, she nearly says, but checks herself. Home. She longs for it as one longs for something perfect and unattainable. ‘It’s so dry out here.’

‘The worst years on record,’ Cynthia says, slowing the vehicle as they’re engulfed in a willy willy. The whirling cylinder of air rocks the car, sprays them in fine red dust, leaves and debris. ‘It’s heartbreaking.’

Caly looks across the landscape. The highway cuts through station country. Either side, trees stripped, the soil denuded by the cattle and sheep, goats, horses, donkeys and pigs; ahead of them nothing but interminable bitumen, a straight line through dry, flat country. The road to nowhere.

If only she didn’t know these things, if she didn’t see ruin and war against the earth in so many places. Much easier to just be, without the burden of knowing. Caly rests her head against the seat, looks through the corner of her eyes at her aunt. Seven years is a long time in a person’s life. Loss. Grief. Caly sees these, along with all the dry summers, in Cynthia. The juice squeezed out, no physical excess, nothing to spare. Her skin fits tightly over her fine bones; her life, her cares distilled to the barest essentials. Yet in this sparseness is a vitality and a stillness that has seen her through.

Caly has met women like her in unlikely places; the Andes, Turkey, Crete. Rural women with the courage and the stamina of survivors.

She must have dozed, for when she wakes Vin Satler is there, the pain is there. She looks out again to the landscape. They are traveling now through vast tracts of burnt-out land; torched mulga and eucalypts stand charred and black, gothic ruins against the skyline. It shocks her to see it, but she’s grateful too for the emotions it arouses. At least she’s able to manipulate these feelings; she has control in her work if not over her lovers. Vegetation barely adhering to the dry sandy soil with nothing left to fortify it from drought, fire and the stock that rip and tear at the roots.

‘Look at what they’ve done here. And it can only get worse, with the way the climate is changing. I’ll never understand farmers. The evidence is incontrovertible. Why can’t they see what they’re doing?’

‘Don’t generalise, my dear. You’re the scientist. You should know better.’ Cynthia smiles at her niece. ‘When the explorers first came up here they saw great grassy plains, plenty of shade trees, rich loam— perfect for grazing. What they didn’t know then was that it was all due to the way the Aborigines managed the land with their fires, their respect for renewal. Clearing and stock has made it what it is today,’ Cynthia says. ‘But why am I telling you, when you know all this? At least some of the pastoralists have been putting some effort into regenerating their properties. They’ve had to. They realise that there’s no economic future in running down the land. Eco-tourism is big up here
now. But of course there’s a lot more to do to make the stations sustainable.’

‘Too little too late,’ Caly says. Then more gently, ‘At least you decided to get rid of the stock from Canterbury. You weren’t making any real money out of it, were you?’

Cynthia, who sees beauty in the colours and sparseness of this landscape, ignores her niece, and softly recites the old poem, *I love a sunburnt country, a land of sweeping plains, of rugged mountain ranges, of drought and flooding rains, I love her far horizons, I love her jewel sea, her beauty and her terror, the wide brown land for me.*

Sentimental as it is, Caly feels the wrench of anticipation; her childhood, the long trips up with her mother, or on the bus; the holidays with Cynthia and Alec at the station. Perhaps, despite the years in the city, it lingers in her blood.

And so the car carries them, like the tumbleweed carried in the wind currents, unresisting towards this place of her childhood, this time made of memories. The sealed road unfurls like a ribbon in front of them, rolling on and on between sandhills, rocky outcrops dotted with spinifex, flat land as far as the eye can see, but with Canterbury at its end. Her mind plays with a simple equation of relativity and the law of inverse ratio; the shorter the distance, the greater the excitement.

‘Have you done any concerts lately?’ her aunt asks carefully.

‘Does it matter?’ Caly struggles to keep her voice light. Even Cynthia, who knows her so well, can not know how hard it’s been. ‘I’ve done a few gigs, low key ones,’ she says more kindly.

‘That’s good, my dear. It would be a shame not to use your gifts.’

Caly pulls some fiery mints from her pack and offers one to her aunt. She laughs tightly. Her gifts are not always as beneficent as some people think.

‘Thanks for sending the programs. I especially liked the one with Michigan Lake on the cover. You all rugged up for winter, looking so beautiful. I felt very proud.’

‘Oh, Auntie! It’s no big deal.’

‘That’s not true, the things you’ve done. You should feel proud of yourself, Caly. Even as a child you never liked to be complimented. You could learn that, accepting tributes more graciously.’

‘ Compared to my mother...’

‘Oh, fiddle dee dee! It’s not to compare, Caly. You enjoy your music, people enjoy your music. That’s all that matters.’ Cynthia chews thoughtfully on the mint. ‘Just getting asked to perform– how did that come about?’

Caly suppresses a sigh. Already it’s happening, the assumption that her life is somehow public property. Evading insatiable curiosity is a skill she has honed since childhood; she is deft at deflecting questions. She has become accomplished at compartmentalizing the layers of her life; living in a big city, it’s been easy to maintain distinctions and separate relationships. It’s more
difficult with Cynthia though. Of all the people in the world, her aunt is the one who knows what lies under her skin. She has never lied to her, at least not successfully; any attempt to do so had been quickly uncovered.

She breathes slowly, to give her voice a chance at composure. ‘I ran into Vincent Satler.’ *He seems to know everybody worth knowing.* ‘He suggested I audition. And so I did.’ *And when Vin Satler says jump,* she thinks resentfully.

‘Vincent Satler! Caly! You never mentioned it!’ Cynthia couldn’t be more surprised.

‘I thought I’d said.’ If only life unravelled like a highway, and what you left behind was behind, she muses; if only the indiscretions of the past would fade into the distance, not lurk around the next bend waiting to catch you out and bring you down. Her aunt senses her unease, reaches over to pat her.

To stop from crying, Caly turns away, looks again out through the side window. She loves this woman, who has been her friend, her ally, her real mother. But there is so much that cannot be said. Her aunt talks on about Vin, predictable things about the town, when he was young, about how he’d made his money and what a big name he is, but Caly refuses to listen to any of it.

She takes the wheel while her aunt rests, driving slowly at first, but soon she is flying along. Suddenly, they are passing through flat spinifex country, a patina of soft green on the deep red earth. The road disappears into the big horizon as if it will never end. For great stretches at a time, they see no other vehicles, no people, nothing except the flattened, time-worn topography. In New York you can never get away from people, pressing in around you, watching, judging.

How often she has dreamed of this landscape, of the uncomplicated emptiness. Of being alone. Cynthia doesn’t count. She can be herself with Cynthia, as much as you can with anybody. Cynthia doesn’t push; they’ve always had that knack of being together, with the stillness. As the car speeds northward, Caly sings. Her voice fills the silence, washing into her thoughts and pouring from her in waves. Years earlier, she had stopped trying to analyse or repress it. It’s something she does. She sings. It’s so very enjoyable to sing.

These are not her mother’s songs. She’s contrived a repertoire that defines her as anything but Madeleine Bell’s daughter. She sings the blues, jazz, folk, rock and roll. The arias of broken hearts and unrequited love her mother sang with such exquisite perfection seem to her irrelevant, at least that’s what her conscious mind insists. Anyway, she doesn’t have the voice, the training to sing such things. She tells herself that she sings to have fun; she doesn’t want the serious professional obsessiveness of her mother. Whatever the truth, it is something she tries not to think about. She likes to sing songs that make her feel good. *On the bright side of the road.* Everything about the song makes her want to sing.
Cynthia sits up, opens her eyes and grins across at her niece. She finds herself wondering, in ways she cannot help, about the girl’s appearance, about her qualities. The girl has inherited her mother’s brilliant eyes, more green than blue, and thick black hair. A beauty, and with the voice. What other traits? She’s wondering, too, what Alec would have made of her.

Caly is blissfully ignorant. There’s just this here, and this now. The form of the song holds them in this moment and carries them along. As the road unravels before them, it appears to Caly that anything is possible. Strange how the future can change, depending how you look into it. The world lies open before her. She can take any direction, any path.

*Into this life we’re born, Baby sometimes we don’t know why, And time seems to go by so fast, In the twinkling of an eye.*

Sitting beside her, Cynthia pumps and puffs on her trumpet in the air, then sweetly sings the soprano backup. They have never been so good.

‘Eat your heart out, Van Morrison,’ Caly yells to the landscape flying by.

They should be tired after the day in the car, but when they hit the turn-off towards the coast they are both giggling and shrieking like schoolgirls. They wind down the windows. Warm air streams in.

‘I love this time of day. Almost night but the day not quite ready to let go,’ Cynthia says softly. In the car they are separated from the elements outside, riding silently through the landscape. ‘Everything soft and mellow. Free of troubles. It doesn’t matter what sort of a day you’ve had, there’s such a feeling of peace.’

Caly throws back her head, eyes widened in mock amusement. ‘You’re joking, right?’ she shrieks. ‘Everything I know about humanity says there isn’t a moment to be wasted for murder, mayhem and destruction.’

‘Such cynicism in one so young, Caly!’ Cynthia tries to make a joke of it. She glances at her niece. Age is so little about outward appearances and, though the skin of the girl’s face and features reflect that beauty found only in the young, a toughness resides below the surface, tangible in the soft bruises beneath her eyes. Caly turns her head away. Staring resolutely ahead, it’s clear that the girl is well past the age of innocence.

‘Do you really think things are as bad as that? There’s no hope for us?’

‘The US does that to you. They’re such liars there, its hard to believe anything they tell you,’ Caly says.

‘All of them?’ Cynthia continues to tease.

‘Oh, of course not everybody. Still, they’re the world experts at spin.’ And no-one better than Vin. She can’t help herself, these thoughts of him.
'Even Obama couldn’t change things,’ Cynthia says.

‘I wish,’ Caly says. ‘Look, I really do. But the systems are so entrenched. It is hard to see how they can change, even if they want to.’

‘It sounds like people the world over, to me. It’s no different here.’

‘Well, yes, that’s true of course. But the US has such influence. The capacity and the power. You’re right, the people you meet, my neighbours, they were great. Americans, they’re so hospitable, so incredibly friendly. It’s just that they’re so gullible.’ Her aunt looks sceptical. ‘It’s true! The government, the whole way the system works there. It’s as if everything is okay, the violence, the prisons, someone executed every other day. And the poverty. In the States, the right to use a gun carries more weight than the right to live without the fear of being gunned down. It’s all okay as long as they can hang onto their— dare I say it, deranged notions of God and freedom. It encourages deception. And big business, the media so pervasive. I saw an interview with Harold Pinter a while back suggesting the US is the most powerful nation the world has ever known, but also the most detested nation the world has ever known.’

She hears herself, hates herself for preaching. Get a life. Get a life. The mantra plays in her mind. She pauses for breath, urges herself to lighten up. But she is unable to stop the trajectory of her thoughts. It is so difficult to change.

For a split second she envies Cynthia, sheltered at Canterbury, far from the world’s craziness. She envies that generation of women— free of the burden of analysing or questioning their lives. But then she remembers, recollects the violence of her aunt’s household, the recrimination and regret, the whole sickening milieu.

Caly sighs, breathe in, breathe out, focusses her attention on a point in the landscape ahead. Tree shadows dance against the darkening sky, the rough edges of the country toned down in the gentle light. The land and the sky are merging. It is indeed a beautiful time of day.

‘I do like that idea,’ she says, her voice lighter. ‘Dusk, the changing of the guard from daylight to night. Think about it, an amnesty, like the Somme on Christmas Day.’

‘Now that’s always struck me as one of the best examples of our stupidity,’ Cynthia says.

‘Absolutely. Gas me, gun me down, blow me sky high every other day of the year, but not on Christmas Day. Christmas Day it’s love, peace and goodwill, but not to worry, the very next day you start all over again. Until next Christmas Day.’ Caly moves in the seat, stretches, realigns her spine within the confines of the vehicle. She’s so tired. ‘But just imagine, Auntie, if you were right, and maybe, just maybe we could persuade every bulldozer, every concrete pourer, every mine maker and chemical mixer, every politician, every wheeler-dealer to pause, to stop, to down their tools— to watch the sun set, to reflect on the beauty of twilight at dusk. The whole world would be enlightened.
The mutilation of the planet would cease for all time.’

‘It’s a beautiful idea but you and I both know it’s never going to happen,’ Cynthia says.
‘Now who’s the doomsdayer?’

‘Coward that I am, Caly, I feel so grateful for having been protected from so much. What a life I have led. Hard work yes, and worries with the weather. Oh, how many times I’ve gone on my knees and prayed for rain, just a bit of rain to keep things going just one more year. But all in all, life’s been good to me.’ Cynthia believes what she says, measuring life’s trials by having a roof over your head, food on the table, material security. ‘I’m just glad I don’t have so many years left in me. It’s too much for an old duck like me. Life’s whizzing past at a rate of knots, everyone hell-bent on destroying everything, there’s no continuity, no stability anywhere. There’s not even any expectation for it anymore. We have a television-free house now, by the way. When Alec died it was one of the first things I did, threw it in the car and took it to Vinnies, got rid of the damned thing. I can’t stand all that trivia that passes for knowledge these days. Still, you can’t escape entirely from what’s happening in the world.’

It’s the first mention of Alec. Caly is grateful for that. ‘It must have been horrible for you. I’m so sorry I couldn’t…’

‘A terrible way to go. Lung cancer must be one of the worst, and then his liver.’

‘I couldn’t… I’m so sorry for not being there for you. But I can’t forgive him for what he did.’

‘He was trying to protect you.’ Like fathers do. ‘You were so young.’

Caly snatches a look again at her aunt. In the fading light, the effects of aging are softened. Cynthia appears solid and strong, her eyes darting, alive, like two bright blue fish. If she’d lived, Maddie would’ve been nearly sixty now, but her aunt, the older sister by almost twenty years, has stood the test of time. Charismatic Maddie, the shining beauty with goddess proportions; but Cynthia, though she’s never owned it, was always so much more substantial, more fully alive. It’s hard to believe she’s nearing eighty. Unlike Maddie, who always danced on the edge of death, it seems as if her aunt could live forever.

Cynthia Marsden, nee Bell. Older sister of her mother, the one and only Madeleine Bell. The man you marry can have such a devastating effect, Caly thinks wryly. Cynthia’s learned that lesson well, and Maddie, too, had certainly won no prizes in men. And then the aeroplane crash had ended all that. She wonders what Cynthia really thought of her mother’s choices. She always seemed sympathetic. But everybody has something to hide. She’s old enough to know that secrets and lies are intrinsic to the human condition. Of this she’s sure; Cynthia has her own skeletons. There’s much about her aunt that she doesn’t know.
She remembers her uncle as a frightening man. People tiptoeing on glass round him, never certain what to expect. She senses that he’d expected something of her, something she was unable to give. Cynthia knew how to handle him better than anyone but was, by virtue of being his wife, the one most likely to trigger his rage.

Her aunt had seemed invincible, but now with her own experience of life, Caly knows the score. Women who fall for silent, taciturn men like Alec Marsden, are in trouble. She imagines the young Cynthia, attracted to his good looks but finding a hologram, a trick of the light; put your hand in and there’s no form, no depth, nothing. What the young bride believes to be strength and maturity turns out to be nothing more than a mirage.

Alec had existed between the hours of dawn and dusk with so little apparent awareness of them; they all of them kept out of his way. Once you had felt the bitter heat of his anger, you never crossed him again. In the evenings he drank, often locked away with her mother. She remembers this now, the shrieks of laughter from the shabby sitting room, the sounds of Maddie singing until, what, they passed out?

How did Cynthia manage it? Caly knows, too well, the uncertainty and violence of loving such men. What her uncle did with his days she never knew, it was with her aunt that she spent her time. A child, she felt rather than understood what was happening. Her memories are of her aunt in shutdown, careful with emotion, except for when she was alone with her. In the bush or by the sea, they inhabited the realm of the natural elements, of creatures, plants and things not of humankind. When they were just the two of them together, the other world of entanglements and fraught human emotion seemed far off, and somehow not so real.

Most of the time, though, Cynthia worked, her time occupied running the station and the homestead. It had provided her with a purposeful distraction. Caly sees this now. The gods were not inclined to reward Cynthia for her courage and perseverance; she was granted no children of her own.

When she was a child, before that final awful summer when Maddie and she stopped coming, she’d grown accustomed to long afternoons with Cynthia. They had barely spoken. They’d been happy gardening, walking, exploring. Theirs was a strange love. With her aunt there was a physicality, a sense of belonging she had never felt with Maddie. But they had no rights. No power to stay together. When Maddie left, she took her daughter with her. Almost immediately, she’d been put into school. Cynthia’s letters, the brief phone calls, a very occasional visit, were all that was permitted.

Driving towards Canterbury, she cautiously allows herself to remember. Even now, if she lets herself, she can locate the ache of it and feel the intensity of their separation. For the first time she
thinks about it from Cynthia’s side, what it must have meant to her aunt.

None of this was talked about. To outsiders, everything must have looked fine. They were Marsdens; Alec a quiet, solid man who was never the same after the war; and Cynthia, who kept to herself, but whom you could rely on if in need. Madeleine, the mad but deliciously famous sister, was the one they loved to talk about.

She’s not a girl anymore and she’s driving up the highway towards a place that may exist only in her memory. Most of her childhood had been away from this place. Maddie’s various apartments in Perth, London and Paris, years at boarding school, years abroad, but the sense of anticipation, the old excitement and longing intensifies as Stark Bay comes closer. And then the corresponding panic. She remembers coming up for those few weeks after her mother’s funeral as the worst time of her life. After Maddie’s death, she had taken off for the States, leaving it all behind. Seven years away. They hadn’t even arrived at the homestead, yet she felt it unmistakably. The pain lying in wait, buried, in the shallow grave beneath her skin.

‘Stop for a pee?’ Cynthia asks.

‘Sure. I’d love a stretch.’

‘I’ll take over then, my dear. That last section can be tricky if you don’t know it.’ It isn’t an admonishment, but it does prompt them both to think of how long it has been.

In New York she’d done her time with the analysts, understood and accepted the baggage she carries. A daughter with a singular ability to induce in her mother a white rage over everything and nothing. She despises the Freudians and the Jungians and anyone else who has made “blaming the mother” a cliche’. But in her case it is true. Her mother. So beautiful to look at, so stunningly beautiful, with so much promise, who could sing like Melba and Callas and Sutherland rolled into one. Her mother, whom she could never please.

Caly pulls the car over onto a flat section at the side of the road and switches off the ignition. Like Mexico, even Greece, the evening will bring a momentary truce. But now, even with the light diminishing, the air is hot. The landscape feels hostile and depressing. She wishes she could close her eyes, lean back in her seat and sleep, but it’s not possible. She’s still so far from home.
Slicks and Shadows

Coming home, this is what Cynthia loves best. Even when coming home had meant coming back to Alec. As a young wife, she had assumed she was there because Alec was there, that if he died she would head south, back to her friends, her family. But life hadn’t turned out that way.

When she goes away, she is like a fish out of water. For decades her fingers and toes have dug deep into this dirt. Pindan soil the colour of a Tibetan monk’s robe, fine particles worn from the primordial rocks, decades breathing this air blown here across the continent from as far away as the Pacific, or directly off the Indian Ocean. The water, the minerals, the essence of this place assimilated into the cells and tissues of her body. She is like the red river gums that line the creek beds, adapted, durable, aging over time, falling back into the earth. The country has claimed her. She couldn’t live anywhere else. It causes her real pain to be away from home, and amidst the turmoil of the city.

Cynthia surprises herself some days. Approaching eighty, her heart giving all the signs of her age, but somedays she feels as strong as an ox. Dr Bediako advised her against the drive, but not being there to bring the girl back was unthinkable. She has taken the wheel for this last leg of the trip because it is clear that her niece is exhausted, and also because it is difficult driving at this time of day. And she knows the road so well. Not that you have to do much, the modern cars are so technically advanced they drive themselves, and the road is even and clearly defined. Not like that first drive up all those years ago. After Geraldton it was dirt road then, up past Carnarvon and all the way to the Cape. For miles and miles. In the fifties, once you left the city and headed north, you were on your own.

Worst of all had been this section, the road into the town. Pot holes concealed under layers of dust that could swallow a whole tyre, a whole car, they used to joke. And hours and hours of corrugations. Cars up this way were dubbed ‘rattlers’ for good reason.

She can remember that first trip as clearly as if it were yesterday. In some sections where the road had been enveloped by sand back to its wild state there was little to guide you, each time you worked a path through the dunes. How green she was. How naive and unknowing. Once, a small grey euro had leapt across the road, missing the mud guard by inches. She’d cried out in relief, the men laughing indulgently at her softness.

Cynthia swings the car due west, straight into the sun. They had planned to be home around dark, but even though the light is fading fast, she slows down. So many roos, shadowy apparitions, impossible to see at dusk. She dreads hitting an animal and killing it, or even worse, wounding it so
that it needed to be put out of its misery. She has been toughened, hardened even, by life up here, but
she treads softly amongst the flora and fauna.

You don’t see what’s ahead, you don’t see yourself growing old when you’re young. She’d been barely twenty. Women in those days didn’t drive, or at least the women she had known, but Alec had insisted, and she had taken lessons in Perth in the weeks before they were married. She
swerves the vehicle to avoid another carcass.

She remembers that first glimpse, the homestead painted white, the grassed yard fenced to
keep the stock from grazing on the lawns, bougainvillea in bloom, tamarisk and eucalypts and on one
side, a tall hedge of grey salt bush. Tidy and controlled. Only later did she appreciate what old Mrs
Marsden had to do to maintain this illusion of civilisation. Water, that was the most important thing.

Time is the most valuable commodity nowadays. Everybody in a hurry. Everyone fretting
about time. Living their lives at breakneck speed and still screaming for more. Pinching it and saving
it. Like she had done in the early days with the last two tomatoes, or a box of fresh peaches, hoarding
them, making them last. That’s how it is for the young ones nowadays, with time.

When she’d first come here, time was the only thing they did have in abundance. She’d
craved fresh food, a reliable source of water, even a decent house to live. Now fresh supplies arrive
twice a week in refrigerated trucks, water flows through pipes and out of taps. Youngsters live with
too much of everything that opens and shuts, everything done in a flash: email, mobiles, tweets,
facebook and whatever else she will never need to know. Yet the one thing they don’t have is time.

‘You asleep?’ Cynthia asks softly.

‘Nup. Just resting.’ Caly raises her arms above her head and stretches, pushes slender fingers
through her thick tangle of hair, firmly massaging her scalp. The motion of her hard fingers
energizes, awakens. ‘Thinking about things— you know, when one thought leads to another, and
another.’

‘Yes, funny isn’t it? I was just thinking of the first time I drove up. With Alec and his
offside. Such a bugger I can’t remember names. And he was with us all those years. I wonder why it
even came into my mind. I haven’t thought of that trip for years and yet it seems it could’ve been
yesterday. I suppose because you’re with me. It’s got me reminiscing.’

‘It’s got nothing to do with me. I wasn’t even born.’

Cynthia laughs. Memories. They worm their way to the surface, like pupae, and the
metamorphosis is always surprising. And she the only surviving witness to their past; how can she
trust what she remembers? She knows how, with the pain and the longing, the lens distorts.

‘Oh, I suppose. Thinking of your mother, and when you were born. It was such a big thing,
for all of us. A baby in the house!’ The babies she had hoped for had never come, she had given up
expecting a baby at Canterbury.

‘It’s the last thing Maddie would’ve talked about. With me at any rate.’

‘It wasn’t an easy time for your mother. Straight after you were born, she brought you up to stay with us. Madeleine needed the support, and we wanted to have you.’

‘Like she never did.’ The daughter’s pain runs deep.

‘Caly! How to make amends for the past? For her own role in it, for Madeleine. Some people are like that, everything measured against their own need, incapable of putting themselves in someone else’s shoes. ‘She had her faults but it wasn’t all bad! Besides, you’re old enough to know you don’t always decide these things. Life has a funny way of just happening.’ Almost like destiny.

‘Some people are driven. Their lives consumed by whatever it is that fires them; they explore continents, they write books, they pursue wealth, they paint, they do what they are compelled by their spirit to do. Your mother was like that. For Madeleine it was her singing, as simple as that.’ And as complex. ‘She had to sing. It wasn’t that she didn’t want to be a mother; you talk as if she didn’t want you, but that’s not true. It’s just that singing always had to come first for her.’

‘And my father?’ This is dangerous ground indeed. In his own way, Caly, she wants to say, but she will not; she’s practiced in this and refuses to make an opening for such talk.

‘It was good for your mother to escape the pressures,’ Cynthia says instead. ‘To get away from Perth– performing all over the place was stressful. I think that time after you were born, when she lived at the homestead, was one of her happiest times. I know it was for me. Oh, look, here’s the turn off to Salty Soak. We’re nearly there. I want to grab the mail and pick up a few things from the store. I thought we would have an omelette for tea.’

In the evening light it is difficult to see and even as she talks, while she’s driving, she is tuned to movement of any kind. The shape of something moving on the side of the road catches the eye.

‘What the hell...?’ The car skids along the verge. A dark figure picks its way carefully towards them. ‘Frankie,’ Cynthia mutters.

A thin, anxious woman climbs into the back. Even in the shadowy light, they see she is wounded. There’s dried blood above one eye, the sour smell of alcohol. ‘Here, drink this,’ Cynthia says, passing a bottle of water. They travel in silence for a few kilometres. ‘Oh, Frankie, do you remember Caly? My niece. She’s staying out at the homestead for awhile.’ The two women eye each other in the muted light. There are years between them, but each remembers from that other time, summer holidays long ago. Frankie beautiful, sexy, the Honky Tonk Woman of Caly’s childhood fantasies; Caly the spoiled child of the homestead, protected, groomed for a life of privilege Frankie knew she would never have. Each in their place.

Darkness swallows the land around them. They drive down the tunnel of the headlights the
last few kilometres to town, made visible by the few lights that dot the horizon.

‘I’ll take you home first, Frankie. You look like you need a jolly good rest, my girl.’ On the outskirts of town, Cynthia turns the car right and they bump along a stretch of unsealed road. A dozen or so prefabricated houses spill pools of light into the clearing. It’s warm and people sit talking on the veranda or outside in the front yard, kids playing chasey, their squeals penetrating the interior. ‘Oh good, Dolly’s home,’ Cynthia says. Frankie reaches over and clasps her shoulder. ‘Take care, Frankie. Come out sometime.’ She turns to look at the woman and Caly sees the sadness in her aunt’s eyes. Frankie nods, then drops her hand and slides wordlessly from the car. They watch as she walks among yapping dogs into the house.

‘My god, what’s her story?’
‘Not tonight, Caly. Really, not tonight. I guess she has changed a lot since you were here.’
‘I didn’t recognize her at first. She looks terrible.’
‘Yes, well she does seem to attract more than her share of trouble.’
‘So Auntie Dolly, she’s still going strong?’ As children they had all called her Auntie.

‘You mean, she hasn’t died yet? She and I are two of a kind, cast in the old mold. Not easily knocked off.’ Cynthia stops the car before a dimly lit store. ‘It’s been a long trip. You must be knackered, Caly. I know I am. I want a cup of tea, then something to eat, a shower and an early night. We’ll have plenty of time for talking.’
Waiting For Grace

Nick Stepaneki is a man who is learning to live in the moment. This has not always been so. There have been times, years in fact, when he’s barely lived at all. Years, days and minutes of planning, and waiting, expecting. For what, he’s never really known. Only that it holds him in a state of unease, and disappointment.

He moves his hand slowly to the lens adjustor, nudges it with delicacy a fraction to the left. The osprey lifts its head. Looks directly at him with penetrating sulphur-coloured eyes. He hardly dares breathe; even with the telephoto lens he is only some three metres from the bird.

All the glorious morning he has lain here, watched her graceful patrols. Finally, she is making her move, plunging feet first and heaving the condemned fish up through the water, up into the air. The fish strains against this inverse gravity, the loss of the known world; twists and lashes against the bird’s will. But she holds on, shakes the weight of the water from her plumage and flies swiftly to the rocky clifftop where she can watch and eat in safety. Reassured, perhaps, by the usual crash of the sea, the cry of the gulls, she dips her head back down to the meal flapping hopelessly in her massive talons.

That’s the ultimate, the moment. He squeezes the shutter, holds still, takes more shots; the haughty profile, a full frontal up the line of the piercing beak, the feathers jewelled with glistening droplets of sea water. He marvels at her singlemindedness, the clarity about what she needs to do. It has been a long time coming for him, to know what it is he is supposed to do. The pressures had come from everywhere.

There’d seemed so many bewildering options. He was constantly trying to second guess. Which path, which dream to pursue? Regretting that road not taken. He’d spent way too much time living in someone else’s castle in the sky. Too much time avoiding censure. Never knowing what he really wanted. Inexpertly, crudely even, he’d begun the process of getting to know himself. After his father, of all people, had given him the camera.

He’s never happier than when he is taking photos. Andrea’s jibe wasn’t so off the mark. It is true, the camera gives him distance. Gives him control, and detachment.

This reading of his compulsion to take photographs is, though, simplistic. There are other things. The camera gives him eyes. He has learned the old adage from Thoreau: *it is not what you look at but what you see.* It is as if the detachment of the camera allows him to see things in their truest form.

He’s never felt so close to the elemental things. Peering through the magical cylinder of the
lens, he enters a parallel world, more intimate, with an authenticity he has never been able to find in life. The years spent in anthropology and history, analysing, scrutinizing, interpreting, were all about words and more words. Never just being here with life, in the present.

Nick Stepanek can command good prices for his work now. His pictures are admired, though for reasons at odds with his intentions, he guesses. So much of a good photograph is in preparing the mind, waiting for the moment, for the definitive view. Ansell Adams called it chance, being there at the right place, at the right time, for the perfect image. Nick calls it Grace. Sometimes it takes weeks to satisfy his soul; weeks of watching, waiting, tense and uncomfortable, day in, day out, before the image he needs is claimed in the mechanics of light and film and chemicals.

For this project he’s using his Pentax, he has yet to be seduced by the digital technology. There’s a necessity with the old cameras for accuracy, for getting it right, that he values more than the photographs themselves. He is regulated by the dollar too, for the costs of mistakes in his kind of work make him think twice. So many pointless photographs sitting in computers. Anyway, he’s spent too many years on a computer. He’s working on a series of photographs on the splendid birds of the Gascoyne region. The project takes him out into the landscape that he loves.

The osprey is preening and preparing to take off. He rebukes himself for the moments lost in thought. There’s such arrogance in the term “bird brain”. He believes with all his heart that the consciousness of this bird is worth a million human brains. He knows the bird has nothing in its mind, no regrets, no dreams, no self-loathing nor despair, nothing except that inexplicable capacity to live according to the precepts of one hundred and fifty million years of genetic blueprint. He longs for the freedom of such a life, knows that it is there in the elusive stillness of the mind, if only he has the discipline and wisdom to find it. He watches as the osprey draws energy into her extraordinary wings and lifts herself skyward, out over the sparkling water, higher, higher until she is just a speck among the other circling birds in the cloudless sky.

Nick stands, stretches. He has hunkered there without movement for close on twenty minutes. Regrettably, his thoughts too unwind and she’s there, a fresh wound immediately in his mind. Caly Bell is back in town. He lets out a despondent breath, gathers up all the bits and pieces of his gear and heads along the cliff top towards the path that leads down to his camp. Silver roofs flash in the sun, the township arranged sleepily in the curve of the bay. And in the distance, the steel hulk of the receiving dock. His eyes shift to the north of the town; massive white dunes roll one upon the other, threatening everything in their path, halting abruptly at the brilliant line of the ocean’s edge; the mouth of the river a milky stain spilling into the perfect turquoise sea. Stark Bay. Awful, he thinks, how we name places so irreverently. All the boats were in long ago, before the afternoon wind, and at this distance the few people out are as indistinguishable as ants. It is about a forty minute walk and
the challenge will be to keep her out of his thoughts for even one of those minutes.

As he leaves the headland, he frames the view in his mind and is tempted to take a shot; resists, moves on. So many images, so many pictures. But there is a council meeting in town, the big boys trying to push things through. By the time he gets back, the day will be drawing to a close. He hopes that she will be there, just as he dreads it. But why should she be there? It’s not her fight. She has bigger fish to fry.

It’s been a long time, a lot of water under the bridge. He wonders if she’s seen Andrea in Perth, knows their current situation. He wonders if she’s even given him a thought, all those years away from here.

‘Hey, Nick!’ A tall boy with bleached hair above dark eyes, stands with several youths. Dingo’s boy, Trevor. A good-sized dhufish in one hand. He doesn’t recognize the others.

‘Nice fish.’ He isn’t surprised to see them so far from the township. The white kids around town rarely leave Town Beach unless driven by their parents, or taken out in the large boats that are moored in the bay. These kids though, cover kilometres every day getting to where the fish will be. How they know is beyond him. He often runs into them during his ramblings.

‘You got tucker?’ Trevor asks.

‘Not much, mate.’ Nick shakes the pack from his shoulders and places it on the ground. There’s peanuts, some crackers, one apple left. He bets the boys haven’t eaten for much of the day. The light is wrong for photographs; bright sunshine gives a silhouette effect. But he’s taken with how stunningly alive they look, teeth gleaming from broad smiles, their eyes animated. In a few years this would change, but at this age they are beautiful.

‘Catfish,’ says the smallest boy. Nick senses the underlying purpose of the statement: we know where you live, maybe we could get a feed there. Catfish is the local name for the tidal creek that runs close to his camp. Soon they are clamouring for a visit to the camp, but he has no intention of taking them there. It isn’t just these kids, it’s the same with anyone. It’s his sanctuary, his retreat from the world. He welcomes no one there.

‘Sorry guys. There’s a meeting tonight about shipping uranium out through the port. I gotta go.’

‘Proper big one, my dad reckons,’ Trevor says.

‘Yeah, too true. A big pain in the arse,’ Nick says, and they all laugh, run screaming flatout down the trail towards the town. Nick breathes a sigh of relief, picks up his gear and heads towards home.
Some Man, Some Night

Frankie Watson holds the bottle up. Not even half full. She takes another swig, smaller this time. She needs to make it last. The bloke leans into her and laughs at something he’s said. She’s reached the threshold, though. The bourbon’s done its work. The things she hears, the things she sees, nothing in focus. This is the best time, that delicious feeling. Separateness, safety, before the angst kicks in.

‘Need a pee,’ she says, skirting behind him, between the throng of the party. She opens a door. Geoff Harvey. With someone. Skirt hiked up, thick legs wrapped around his waist. Frankie can’t make out who. It doesn’t matter. He’s done almost everybody in town, filthy bastard. Did Pippa know, or care? Harvey meets her eyes, smiles. Frankie swings her head, pulls the door tight.

In the bathroom, Frankie sits, head resting in hands, wondering if Nick’s heard she’s home. Someone’s thumping the door. She takes a swig from the bottle, heads out. The music’s wrong. She longs for something strong, real; INXS, ACDC, music of her time that really rocks, not this insipid, indecipherable crap. There’re people everywhere, shrieking gulls, snorting pigs, spreading from living room to deck. She needs a breather, edges past the barbecue.

‘Frankie, get your arse over here, darling.’ Some man, from some night. She keeps moving along the veranda until she’s alone.

Northwest nights. That’s what she misses when she’s away. Rich bottomless sky; black velvet, diamond studded. Satler said that once, to get a reaction. She’d been young, stupid, murmured some bullshit. Now she’s just stupid. Certainly not young. At that age, she hadn’t seen it for what it was. The stars so near, like you can reach up, touch one. The stars suspended, each one distinct. You travel through them.

Frankie breathes the sea, so close she can hear the rhythm of waves in the darkness. She breathes the scent of overfull blooms, ripened fruits, a relentless cycle of decay she can’t see, but knows from years of familiarity.

The cigarette comes naturally to her mouth. She always smokes up here. It’s easier, no social pressure, everybody living outside. The nicotine hits home. She sighs with pleasure, with peace, washes it down with bourbon.

‘You back?’ Nick Stepaneki. She hasn’t heard him come along the veranda.

‘No. It’s a handy avatar I keep for these occasions,’ Frankie says. ‘Who is she?’

‘Does it matter?’

‘Just curious. She’s familiar.’

‘Caly Bell. School holidays at the homestead.’
‘Not a schoolgirl now. You know how to pick them, Nick.’
‘You’d like her. You and her, you’d have a lot to say.’
‘Pillow talk?’
‘For chrissakes, Frankie. It’s not like that, we’re friends. Anyway, it was you who left.’ Nick looks upwards, inhaling warm air, recognizes his favourite constellation. Time, to adjust to her presence, to insulate. ‘Environmental scientist, she made Ocean Blues, about the Blue Whales. And Calypso, filmed around the Mediterranean. She’s working on one about that spill in the Gulf of Mexico.’
‘I didn’t ask for her fuckin’ CV, though you’re a full bottle.’ She drinks, lights up. Sucking in the feeling. ‘What’s she doing here? That’s what matters.’
‘Visiting Cynthia. And since she’s here, your mob have asked her to take a look at the hub proposal. Hasn’t Cyril mentioned it? She’s a greenie, but an exceptionally qualified one.’
‘Yeah, I get it.’ Frankie turns to face him, laughs. ‘Satler must be stoked. He was thick with her ma, I remember that. He doesn’t like it, Satler, people working against him. Big on loyalty, thinks we’re all part of his ménage.’ Frankie demonstrates the bottle’s empty, turning it over in her hands. ‘I need a drink, get me a drink Nicko, will you darlin’?’
He drains his glass. ‘I’m off, Frankie. Just wanted to say hello. Native Title meeting tomorrow. You be there?’
‘Not bloody likely.’ She laughs, runs her hand along the length of his arm. ‘Go on, Nick. Get me a drink. I can’t do this anymore if I haven’t got a drink.’
‘I’ll drop you home, Frankie. You’ve had enough.’ As soon as the words are out, he regrets them. Frankie could always cut him down with her tongue. Or worse. He leaves briskly through the side gate, before it builds into a scene.

Frankie leans against the veranda railing, head resting on her arms, just for a moment until she gets her second wind. Nick’s a bore. She needs a drink. She needs it fast. She turns and looks along the length of timbered flooring. People, happy people, fun people laugh and dance in the pools of light that illuminate the deck.
1995
Calypso

Her body moves with the recklessness of youth, careless of the rocky path, running across hot sand until her feet hit shallow water. The ocean beckons, brilliant, the only colour in the bleached landscape. She looks down at the swirl of foam around her ankles, senses the cool relief rise up through her legs, pronounces herself rid of them all.

She loves the heat. The days are hot and the sun burns the landscape, so that in the glare everything turns to a whitened ash. Like one gasping for air, she breathes in the smell of seaweed and salt. She gathers the sounds of the wind and the waves, the sea birds overhead, into the shell of her ear. Her senses are full of the customary things of summer. Even the taste on her tongue as she wets her dried lips is of summer.

The sky, bleached too by full sun, stretches like a silky white canopy above her, shelters her. She stands, a tiny speck on the edge of the sea, and feels herself alone and free. She is not alone, for the skies above and the ocean before her, even the sand on which she stands, abound with life. But in her youthful preoccupation, her anger, she can feel only the importance of her own existence. For all intents and purposes she is alone; no footprints mark the sand, no voices fill the air. This does not alarm her. It seems that most of her life has been lived on this coast, these summer holidays, all that is primary to her existence has happened here; she is used to these vast spaces and the absence of people. Freedom.

She wonders if they’ve started drinking yet, her mother and Uncle Alec. She wonders where Auntie Cynthia has gone to lick her wounds. It’s her aunt who suggested she go for a swim.

All morning they’ve been fighting. Last night the promise of the carnival in town, but when she woke to doors slamming, she had seen at once another long, empty day ahead. The voice in her that urged retreat usually overrode the voice that desired to stay in the house, but there were still times when she would not be pushed out. Sometimes she stayed, to remind them that she, too, belonged. But she was old enough to know the cost.

She moves back up onto the beach and throws her towel and hat onto the sand, sits soaking up the violent heat. The sun sears her skin. She feels it like hot blades slicing below the surface. She draws open her beach bag, her aunt’s gift for Christmas, and takes out a tube of sunscreen, squeezes the thick paste onto her fingers and paints it carefully, like a minstrel mask, to protect her nose and lips. She smears handfuls of oil smelling of coconut from faraway, along her arms, her legs, her belly, already brown from the long summer.

‘Hey, Caly!’ She jumps at the suddenness of the kids.
They’re all there; even Stephen Satler is with them. She watches them sliding, rolling in a ball of legs and shrieking down the sandy embankment before pelting across the sand toward her. So free and easy together, in that way that eludes her.

‘We went up to the homestead. They said you were here,’ Pippa says. ‘We waited for you for ages and ages. In town. Hey, I thought your mama was gonna sing?’ There is the customary note in her voice; everyone in town speaks of Madeleine Bell, opera singer, in a tone that indicates her pretensions, her difference.

Caly lets this pass; the kids could try as often as they liked, but she knows how to evade their questions. She is used to not telling. She leads them deftly away from questions about home, about herself, until they are all talking at once in response to her requests for details of the carnival.

Someone has turned on a radio. Neil Young’s voice travels on the hot easterly winds across the sea. *Look at Mother Nature on the run in the nineteen seventies.*

Not that they are listening; the song means nothing to them beyond the music, reminding them that they are young, that they are something apart from their parents. The girls settle themselves on towels while they wait to have the place to themselves. When the boys go, they will rub oil onto their own soft skin and talk, their heads resting on sleek arms, about love and life. Not how it is, but how they wish it to be. The boys strip down to bathers, pull on masks and snorkels. Nick waddles about like a penguin in giant flippers to gain their attention.

‘Oh, piss off, won’t you? By the time you get wet the bloomin’ holidays will be over!’ Pippa yells at him and then again at Stephen, who still lingers on the shore. ‘Ooh, don’t you want to get your pretty hair wet?’ That Stephen rarely acknowledges them only adds to his distinction. That, and the fact that his father is Vincent Satler. Caly watches him from the corner of her eye, wondering if he knows he’s lead man in all their dreams.

‘I was just thinking, I thought you might come out. To the reef.’ This could not have surprised them more.

‘Oh yeah, sure.’ This is Stark Bay where girls know their place. Girls in this town love the beach. They sunbake on the soft sand. They swim. But close to shore— they do not go out beyond the breakers. They don’t surf. They don’t dive.

‘I’ll come,’ Caly blurts out. *Anything boys can do, girls can do better* is one of her mother’s slogans, not that she ever trusts anything Maddie says. But the words are out, perhaps to impress Stephen Satler, perhaps to set herself apart from the other girls. They’re all looking at her, Pippa feigning shock on her large, long face.

When Stephen smiles broadly and throws a mask over for her to try, Caly realises that she hasn’t considered the dive, not really. She has snorkelled before, on the bits of reef that run parallel
to the beach; just not out in the deep water. There was always something to see, even there at the edge of the sea. But going with the boys means swimming out hundreds of metres, with the big fish. It’s a long way from the shoreline.

She’s a good swimmer. All the kids are. In the summertime they swim every day. There is little else to do. She walks with Stephen to the water’s edge, looks out across the bay. The ocean is the colour of turquoise, but lucid as glass, a jewel. She can see through to the clean sand, a perfect chalice to hold the sea. The other boys bob like whales, in and out of the water, air spurting through their snorkels.

Once they’re through the waves, she swims swiftly through the water. None of them have wetsuits and she wears over her bikini an old woollen sweater Stephen has given her. Though the water isn’t cold, she appreciates the layer of warmer water against her thin skin.

She could never have imagined this exhilaration. In her mind it had always been frightening out here, beyond the breakers. The roll of white foam had served as a boundary beyond which she would never go. But now, looking back towards the shore, too far from land for it to be reassuring, there is no fear. She’s being held by the sea—she feels safe. She dips and dives, releasing herself. Young as she is, she already knows she will always remember this day. The glorious coral beneath her, the luminous rainbows of fishes. And the silence. The wondrous silence.

She jumps when, invisible under the sand, a large ray lifts like a huge frying pan with long handle, and drifts in the current. The reef is impossibly alive; damselfish dip and swirl, butterflyfish, wrasses, angelfish swim so close she could kiss them.

Below, the corals carry on millions of years of life, millions of years of spawning, of growing and dying and reproducing. In her imaginings, the reefs are the suburbs and apartment blocks of the sea, hiding places and homes for all the smaller fish, with terraces and plazas offering a variety of food and entertainment found in an urban centre. But not concrete and bricks, these are creatures with a living destiny. The sea grasses pull this way and that, caressing her limbs, leading her in the dance. As if she is singing. Her whole being, all of her, is drawn into the cadence of the great ocean, into its enduring song. She floats in the sea and all that awaits her back at the homestead—being sent away to school, her mother—all these things are washed away.

Stephen swims up beside her, presses her arm. His eyes signal the surface. And she follows his gaze, tilts her face upwards. The sky is no longer shining through the crystal clear water, but is concealed by the massive white belly of a shark.

It’s difficult not to draw in breath, not to panic, but somehow she holds steady. Stephen is pulling on her sleeve, trying to speak to her. She swims with him to the surface and breathes deeply.

‘Whale shark,’ he gets out between breaths. ‘Don’t worry, it won’t hurt you.’ She knows this
about the whale shark, but all the same feels relief in his saying it out loud. It is awesome, such a beast, all mouth and bulk. Her heart races a million miles a minute.

The huge fish is less than a metre from them now, so close it’s hard to take in. Excitement and wonder overcome all fear. With Stephen beside her, she swims rapidly towards it. She points at the chequerboard pattern of light yellow stripes and dots marking the pale grey of the shark’s back. It’s impossible to think how such a design has evolved. It reminds her of the wobbegongs she’s seen secreted in the shallows, but she can’t imagine this shark hiding. In time she will learn all that’s known about the whale shark. In this moment though, it’s enough to experience the awe she feels.

The whale shark, a large female, takes no notice. It is difficult for them to keep up with her. Eventually, using her entire body for propulsion, the fish swims away.

Exhilarated, exhausted, she and Stephen paddle towards the beach. She feels profound longing such as she had never known, and she doesn’t want to head to shore. She wants, more than anything she has ever wanted before, to follow the fish. It’s the first time she’s really experienced the limitations of her body, and she feels it as one more blow.

Back on the shore she gives a clever, diverting account to the kids; such fun, such an adventure, the most amazing thing she had ever done; knowing all the while that this is something far deeper. She could not have articulated it, but in some part of her she thinks she sees with a startling clarity her destiny marked out.
Child’s Play

Nick and Stephen meet Caly at the gnarled paperbark tree near Old Mac’s camp. Mac’s not here, probably fishing on the shifting tide. They settle at the base of the tree amid his empty cans and blankets. Nick lights three cigarettes and hands one to each of them. Stephen splutters but Caly doesn’t flinch—draws back as smoothly as Alec, takes a swig of the alcohol and feels its hot burn all the way to her stomach. Her eyes water, but this too she keeps under control. She’s like Madeleine, she can hold her liquor.

The sun drops below the horizon as they reach the bottom of the bottle.

‘Gonna puke,’ Nick says, leaping up and out into the darkness.

Stephen smiles across at her and winks. She moves closer so that his hand can easily reach under her shirt, between her legs. She rides his fingers, even when Nick returns and falls comatose on Old Mac’s swag.

‘What will you tell them?’ Stephen asks.

‘Nothing— I’m telling them nothing. They all give me the shits.’ She moves her hands into the crease of his groin and rubs. ‘Come back with me. Auntie goes to bed early and Uncle Alec and Maddie will be pissed by now. Alec always flakes out in his armchair.’

‘Really?’

‘Really. It’ll be okay, Stevie. It’ll be fine. They won’t even know we’re there.’

Somehow they get Nick into the car, drop him home and drive on to the station in Stephen’s new car. He steers with one hand, his fingers stroking her bare legs. As they near the homestead, he slows the car to a crawl, turns the radio low.

‘You smell like booze and Old Mac,’ she says and laughs out loud.

‘Shhh,’ Stephen kisses her with red wine kisses. On the bed he begins, button by button, to remove her shirt. ‘Caly, are you sure?’ She pushes his hands away, deftly undoing the buttons herself, removing her shirt, her bra.

When Alec throws open the door they are out of their clothes, engrossed, caught like cattle in the glare of the overhead light.

‘What the fuck’s going on here?’

To come back from that intense place— it takes all their powers. Scrambling for clothes, hastened by Alec’s abuse, by his relentless eyes.

‘And you can get that sausage roll back into your trousers where it belongs.’ Alec’s screaming and thrashing at them both with a towel he’s picked up from the floor.
‘Go Stevie, just go,’ Caly’s voice feels like steel. ‘This is between you and me, Uncle.’

And the boy does. He runs and he doesn’t stop until he’s in the car and speeding towards town.

Caly’s covered now. She looks directly into his eyes.

‘Get a good look?’

‘Don’t, my girl.’

‘I’m not your girl.’ He hesitates just long enough for her to ride him down. ‘Get out of my room. Or I’ll tell Auntie that you came here perving.’ She senses the fear in him. ‘I’ll tell Maddie. That you’re a perv.’ She doesn’t mean to smile, but it forms as surely as if she’s slapped him. This is what Maddie would do. And she’s seen how Alec bends over backwards for Maddie. ‘We all know that you’re in love with my mother.’ She says this before it even occurs to her what it is she’s saying.
Broken China

Caly wraps her arms around her knees and pulls herself into the smallest shape she can imagine, clamps the palms of her hands over her eyes until all the things she has seen are not there anymore. She can still hear them, though— the voices spiral and tunnel through the thick stone walls of the garage. Loudest of all is Maddie. Her voice, trained in opera singing, gives her an edge in screaming Alec down. Alec, who usually sounds so authoritative, and who Cynthia can never speak over. Caly can’t hear Cynthia. Just the thrusts of Maddie and Alec’s speech, a plate heaved at the wall, splintering into a thousand chips of porcelain across the floor. A door slams and she hears crying, and hears Cynthia running towards the garage.

Caly scrunches up more, so that she’s as small and round as a ball. Go away. Go away. Go away. But no sound comes out. In the darkness of the room she’s invisible, if she can only keep her mouth fixed tight and every nerve and muscle in her body still. Motionless. Silent. Cynthia will never guess she’s here. But the footsteps are clear even over the din behind the wall and she hears Cynthia moving toward her. Her soft words. Her gentle touch.

Go away, she wants to scream, because if you don’t I’ll have to cry and I am fifteen and I am too old to cry and if you don’t go away it’ll make me feel like a child. I’m not a child I’m a woman now can’t you see Auntie, with these breasts and thighs, but I will never be like Maddie will I Auntie, I’ll never be like Maddie, beautiful and loved?

Cynthia’s hands stroke her arm and whispers, ‘Caly, my dear child— don’t cry, it’ll be over soon.’ Even as she speaks, Caly hears their voices drop and the clink of glasses. ‘It’s over,’ Cynthia says again. ‘Come on, let’s go for a swim. I’ve got your bathers here.’

On the shore, clusters of seabirds swoop above them and in the sunshine the dark aloneness of the garage seems a million miles away. The water holds her as truly and kindly as a real mother and for some moments, she’s in the lap of the ocean. Above the tumult of the waves as they hammer the sand, she thinks she hears the sound of the Commodore starting up, guesses her mother is leaving.

‘Caly, look,’ Cynthia calls. A school of ocean mullet are marooned in a pool of shallow water. Panic rises from them– you can see that they’re entirely preoccupied with the motion of the outgoing tide.

‘She’s running away. Where’s she going?’ Caly asks.

Cynthia puts her arm around the girl’s shoulders. ‘Don’t worry. She’ll be back.’

You’re just a child, and a child cannot understand. Caly holds her tongue, dips her right foot
into the pool and watches as the curious fish nibble around the curve of her toes. Such simple creatures, mullet. She could reach down, scoop them out onto the sand so easily and leave them there to die breathless on the waterless shore. They’re so vulnerable. Even now, a flock of pelicans are lowering their large carriages onto the flat beach. They waddle a safe distance to wait.

‘We could make a channel, Auntie, let them back into the sea.’

Her Aunt, though, favours the natural order and advises non-interference. She suggests another swim.

‘I hate her,’ Caly says as they walk back up through the dunes. ‘Why is she so nasty? I hate her.’ Cynthia says nothing, her disapproval evident in a sharp glance. ‘She’s a fucking bitch.’

‘Caly!’ Cynthia grabs the girl’s arm and swings her around. ‘That’s enough.’

‘But it’s true. You heard what she said. She’s so mean.’

‘You’re just a child, Caly. I know it’s hard for you to understand. I hope one day you will. It isn’t easy for your mother.’
An Easterly Wind

It’s one of those days when the wind cuts through to the soul, relentless and unsettling. The only thing they live for, the beach, is out of the question. Even back here, hidden amongst the scrubby vegetation, the wind tears at his shirt sleeves. He releases his finger from the trigger and eases the .22 down from his shoulder to the ground beside him. Boredom grips him like a determined dog, unshakeable. He could not have said why he is even here, when he knows that Caly despises him for it. At least he hasn’t actually shot anything today. He’d tried for a crow but it stared back at him through the sights, with an air of such derision that his aim had been wide. He’d never shot a crow. They are hard to shoot, considering their relative size and the arrogance with which they hold their position. He shot a willy wagtail once. It didn’t seem to know it was in his sights, or realise what had hit it. It had fallen the several metres to the ground without a sound. In the palm of his hand it felt warm and soft. Caly wouldn’t speak to him for a week. Nick and Geoff had been with him. Someone must have told.

It’s so hot. Stephen rolls over onto his back and stares up into the sun. Hot hot. Not languid hot. Languid. He learned that word in Mrs Loves’ English class. Mrs Loves, what a name. What a woman. He feels disturbed, just thinking of her. He wishes he could be languid with Mrs Loves. Languid heat implies sensual. This is just hot, and boring. Circles upon circles move from the pupil of his eyes. A helix of colour, concentric spheres and movement connect him to the sun. He feels strangely potent, a fusion of desire, of longing. The violent rays of the sun beat down upon him, pull at him. If only he could source the power.

Grow up Stephen, his father’s forever saying, his eyes betraying his disappointment and his rage. As if he didn’t want that, more than anything. To grow up. To be able to do whatever he wanted. At sixteen you have no power.

It wasn’t languid with Caly– it was quick and urgent and the mess of it, the sense of incompletion, clung to him like dirt. He felt dirty. They made him feel dirty. The stupid old git went beserk. In an instant, Caly was sent to Perth. They wouldn’t let him see her. All of them were agreed on that.

Stinging sweat pools in the sockets of his eyes. ‘Not crying. Not crying,’ he tells himself. Things had changed, he understands that. He has changed. Self-consciousness has taken a hold of him. He can feel them, watching him, judging him, wanting more of him than he knew.

There’s some relief in not seeing Caly. He isn’t sure if he could ever meet her eyes. He tries to imagine what they would say.
Stephen staggers to his feet, spinning, regaining his balance, pulls up his shirt to dab the moisture from his face, presses the material of his shorts into his groin to mop up the sweat. He thinks he hears his mother’s insistent call and that annoys him, that something in him still responds to her influence. He’s pleased to realise it’s a crow, observing him intently from a nearby tree. Warily, he turns towards home. Out of the shelter of the scrub, the hot wind cuts again into his skin. He runs the last kilometre, thirsty and ready to take a shower. His heart feels old, leaden. There is fear, too, that he may have pushed himself too far, that the boy he knew so well has indeed grown up.

As he enters the clearing to the outbuildings, he comes to an abrupt stop. His father: heading towards the boat shed, not running exactly, but traveling in long quick strides. Stephen presses himself tightly into the wall, positioned so he can see where his father is going. Not so much wanting to pry as trying to avoid meeting up with him. His father looks about him and slips through the door of the shed. It is all so strange. He’s never known his father to do anything that did not have a definite purpose. And yet? Stephen’s inquisitiveness governs what happens next. He moves silently, keeping close to the out-buildings.

The shadowy interior viewed through a thin gap between the iron cladding of the shed makes what he sees there even more difficult to figure out. Frankie. His father is talking to Frankie Watson. He can hardly make out his father’s features, it’s Frankie who faces him. Curiosity surges in him now. Frankie! Her beauty unsettles everybody, everything. He knew this because he’d heard it so often; the men in town talk about Frankie’s attractions even as they slag her off. Even when he was younger, he’d seen that the venom in their attacks came largely from their not being able to have her. He’d felt it, too, for himself. His first notions of beauty, his understanding of desire, coalesced in Frances Watson.

But his father. She raises her voice and he thinks his father will slap her. But in the raised hand is a large envelope which she takes without ceremony. Stephen can hear his own heart pounding, drowning out all other sound. He strains to hear what she is saying. She peers into the envelope, then looks up at his father. The word comes to him, she is mocking, mocking his father. His father says something, Frankie nods and he turns to walk out. Stephen drops into a crouch, tucks his head into his knees, like a child who plays hide and seek and thinks that by not looking he won’t be found. He hears the crunch of their feet on the gravel, heading away from him. He stays, hiding there until his legs are numb and he hears only the whistling of the dry wind in the thicket of casuarinas, the mutterings of the cockatoos roosting in the branches overhead.
2015
A Fish Out of Water

They’re all here. It’s as if in the years she’s been gone, the barflies at the Stark Bay Tavern haven’t moved. Looking older, but none the wiser. Rick Robinson reminds her who he is, and then Caly remembers, vaguely, meeting him in hotel rooms after they had run into each other in Perth. He’d had a wife.

Shouting above Jimmy Barnes blasting through the speakers, he suggests they escape. Why not, she thinks, there’s nothing else here. Back at his place they rut, like the deer Vin Satler had taken her to see that weekend they stayed on the ranch in Wyoming. Some memories are so vividly etched they will not fade. During that trip, she’d really thought Vin and she...

Rick sprawls across the bed, on his back, mouth wide open, snoring. She drags herself from under his long heavy limbs. He lurches, clutches at her.

‘Don’t,’ she barks. Then, because he couldn’t know, because it’s not his fault that she is here, she says, ‘I need to go to the bathroom.’

Out in the bright morning air she wants only to be back in the shelter of the homestead, the shuttered room. The homestead couldn’t be more than five kilometres and she sets off, her sandals swinging from her arm. Flies come from nowhere and settle hungrily at the corners of her mouth, her eyes, everywhere sweat collects. The yap of the dogs ricochets from house to house as she moves through the empty streets of the town, and beyond the thin line of shops towards the road that leads out to the homestead. Half an hour on, it’s clear to her what an idiot she’s been. Silence, silence, and acres of low-lying scrub. Though it can’t be more than seven o’clock, the sun belts on her skull, her back. Her legs burn from the feet up. And then a car, thank god. Rick must have realised what she’s done. She slides into the dark interior.

‘Well, well, if it isn’t the elusive Caly Bell. I’ve been wondering when we’d bump into each other but I never imagined it’d be like this.’

She turns abruptly. Stephen. She looks at him, then away again, to brush her hands through the flattened hair, to brush down the hem of her skirt that clings to her legs, to brush away the smell of herself.

‘Here, drink,’ he says, taking pity. She gulps the water. Takes the tissues he holds, splashes water across her face, into the folds of her throat, wipes coolness along her arms.

‘What are you doing here?’ She can’t conceal the shock, the fury.

Stephen, laughs, shrugs. ‘I always come, didn’t Cynthia tell you? I always stay at the homestead when I come up for a meeting.’
‘I hadn’t heard.’
‘Ha, she has never been one to waste words, your aunt. Still, I’m more than a bit put out that my impending arrival hasn’t rated. Perhaps now you’re back I’ve slipped from favour.’ He grins. ‘You haven’t been telling tales, have you?’

She can barely think, let alone speak. Stephen.

‘She’s missed you, you know.’ He looks ahead as he guides the car out onto the road again. ‘The best of all medicines, having you home.’

‘Home? Is that what you call it? I’m only here for a few weeks.’

‘Okay, steady, no-one’s making you stay. But whatever, Cynthia’ll benefit from your being here. She puts on a good imitation of strong and fit but that last episode knocked her around for sure.’

‘What episode?’

‘When they flew her to Perth. Her heart. You do know about it?’ It’s the first she’s heard. Caly struggles to keep her voice level.

‘Thankyou, Stephen, but I don’t think I need to hear how Cynthia’s doing from you. I may not have been here but I have kept regular contact.’ Even if you do bum a room off her regularly, I’m here now and I do have eyes. I can see.’

‘Dad said he caught up with you.’ He places the words carefully. Is there nowhere she can hide? There’s nothing she can say. Stephen shrugs. ‘It’s only one night. I fly back tomorrow at sparrow fart.’ He abruptly swings the car back towards town. ‘I need coffee. I’m not the only one who’s been up all night. I got the early morning flight to Carnarvon and then drove up here.’ He pulls into the roadhouse. ‘Not that I was having as much fun as you, obviously.’

‘Espresso with two sugars,’ she snaps.

He laughs out loud, and says, ‘This here ain’t Upper East, my dear. But I’ll see what I can do.’

She watches him stride into the café, that same old walk, that same energy. Waiting, she fiddles with the radio and catches a line about the compulsory acquisition of Aboriginal lands.

‘At least we come out of it with something, it’ll provide good education, health for the community,’ the spokesman says. ‘A win-win.’ This must be a politician. ‘It’s a great opportunity, developing the port as a world-class facility, delivering up to two thousand jobs, putting the entire region on the map, And for the Indigenous people, a real future.’

‘Fuck! Fuck! Fuck!’ Stephen throws himself into the vehicle, thrusts a coffee in her hand.

‘What?’

He puts the car into drive and they squeal out onto the highway.
‘Stephen? What is it?’

‘Bradley Myers. Remember him? His parents ran the store. Big on development. They own half the town. Well, not half, Dad owns three quarters of it and the Myers most of what’s left over. He’s just told me that the Yamatji deal is done. Late last night, signed and sealed.’

The coffee catches in her throat. Stupid of her, to forget even for a minute, that Vin owns this town.

‘The win-win situation?’ she says.

‘Ha, so you do know. Why didn’t you say something?’

‘Stephen, I know nothing. I just heard some guys on the radio– if that’s what you’re talking about. It sounds as if they had no choice.’

‘A major port development with infrastructure for iron ore, bauxite and nickel. And much more, if there is any basis to the rumours. All based at Jimmy’s Cove–remember, the oysters and crabs?’ He glances at her, and goes on, ‘On Yamatji Lands. And yes, the government’s determined that it’ll go ahead.’

‘Uranium?’

‘You know how it is, they’re not really saying.’

‘To threaten compulsory acquisition seems pretty determined.’

‘Cute, your American accent.’

‘Is that your way of telling me it’s none of my business, don’t get involved?’

‘No.’ He takes a gulp of the coffee. ‘No, not at all. I wasn’t thinking about the activist filmmaker who, if the media is to be believed, stirs up a hornet’s nest wherever she goes, but the girl I knew back then.’

‘Should I stay out of this? It’s been suggested.’

‘On the contrary, I’d love you to document the story– get it out there.’ He turns to look at her. ‘It’s dangerous work you do, dear Caly. It’s no accident that they hate you. You always did know where to land a punch. All that practice.’

‘Oh, for fuck’s sake, here we go. And now we know why I can’t stay here.’ Though it is cool in the car, she presses damp tissues against closed eyelids and sighs.

‘This time yesterday it was looking good. I thought we’d made progress. I thought they’d be able to hold out.’

‘What are you talking about? Who?’

‘You really haven’t heard? So much for regular contact.’

‘What’s that supposed to mean?’

‘I’m not saying it’s the only reason, but it is breaking Cynthia’s heart.’
‘She hasn’t said a word.’ Another thing Cynthia has concealed. ‘Nothing. Not a word. Is Canterbury implicated?’

‘Jesus! It’s not for me to say. You need to speak to Cynthia.’ They drive in silence until the homestead comes into view. ‘I love this place,’ Stephen says.

The stock grid has been removed and the last kilometre of road winds through pastoral country, unkempt, the legacy of grazing sheep still evident in the feral grasses that have colonized the landscape. Her aunt’s pride and joy, the garden, is also showing the stress of long dry seasons and Cynthia’s inability to manage the property. The house sags, tired and uneasy; the sun rising in the east stares unblinking upon the façade of the building, exposing the gaping cracks, its fallen timbers, the secrets, the lies. Love? This place?

The car clock says it’s just gone 8am. Cynthia will have been up for hours—will be surprised to see them both.

‘Stephen,’ she begins, but he lifts his hand to silence her.

‘Go and freshen up,’ he says. ‘I’ll go in the front door and provide a worthy distraction.’

‘Thanks,’ she says, and slips quickly out of the car and along the side veranda.
Frankie fingers the cut above her eye, gives it another dab with the damp cloth. It’s nothing she hasn’t seen before but she thinks it might be prudent to minimise the damage before her mother gets a chance to examine her. She runs her fingers through wet curly hair, shakes it into shape. Despite everything, she’s still looking good.

‘You comin’ girl, or what?’ Dolly Watson yells from the front of the house.

‘All right, all right. Keep ya hair on.’ She doesn’t want to go, but neither does she want to stay here. She steps out of the bathroom straight into the living area. The room smells of fried eggs and sausages. Victor and Dingo sit at the table drinking tea. Everyone lives in everyone’s pocket, no privacy, no space. She notices it when she’s first back. The doors of the three bedrooms open out on top of each other. And there’s always someone sleeping on the couch, on the living room floor. Through the door, she sees Vic’s kids swinging on the clothesline. When his wife died he came home, too useless. He should be at work now.

‘That big city door give you a good going over eh, Sis?’ he says, looking at her bruised face.

‘Oh, shut up little brother. You got a smoke?’ Frankie says. It’s unlikely, but always worth a try. She grabs her carry bag though there’s nothing of value in it, no smokes, no money. There’ll be a feed at the meeting, but it’s smokes she needs. A drink is out of the question. Dolly Watson will take a lot from her family, but drinkers, no way. If Dolly knows she’s on the booze, she’ll be out on her ear.

She steps down into the yard, winces in the blazing light. A mangy bitch, her teats dragging on the red dirt, ambles up, sniffs about her bare legs. She has sponged the tight black skirt she’d worn yesterday, but the dog isn’t fooled. Her mother looks her over, bites her tongue and climbs in behind the wheel of the faded red ute.

‘They always put on good tucker. And I’ll pick up somethin’ for supper after.’ Her mother is happy, as long as she knows where the next meal is coming from, as long as there’s food on the table. ‘It’s going to be a stinker.’ The dogs have taken refuge under the shade of the car and it amuses Frankie to see them slink away as the vehicle roars into life.

The first few days home she notices these things; the dogs, the rubbish piled up along the road leading into town. Not at her mother’s place, that’s spotless. Dolly’s worked most of her life cleaning up other people’s dirt but regardless, she never fails to clean up at home. It’s one thing Frankie has got from her, she likes the place clean and tidy too.

Dolly waves to the folk who sit on plastic chairs in the shade under the few surviving trees,
some on a bed which stands in a derelict yard. Unimaginative government houses; Frankie cannot count how many inquiries and committees she’s sat on over the years, but still they’re dropping these cramped and inadequate prefabricated houses into the dry, dusty clearings. Bits and pieces of plastic and paper cling to the fences, fluttering in the dry wind like trapped bats. Broken glass glitters in the sunlight. Frankie keeps her eyes down.

‘Donny and Vic put that new airconditioning in for me a few months ago,’ Dolly says. ‘These houses are real hot boxes.’

_Not for you Mum_, Frankie wants to say, _for themselves_. But who is she, what does she ever do for her mother? Instead she says, ‘What’s happening, you tough mob getting soft in your old age?’

‘Don’t you start. Your brothers are always at me. _You need to slow down, Ma._ You’s all talking me into the grave.’

‘Oh Mum,’ Frankie says, feeling the symptoms of her rage, the craving for a smoke, a drink, the overwhelming fatigue rise up in her like it’s a cancer growing. That her mother’s life has come to this. That in a few months everyone living here at Two Mile will be relocated into ‘nice new homes’, with little consultation and no understanding, so that the new development can go ahead on what’s now viewed as prime land. Real estate agents. A bigger waste of space than lawyers.

They pass a silver Commodore, the bonnet up and the rear wheels on blocks.

‘Smiley’s?’ she asks.

‘Yep,’ Dolly says. ‘That one’s Jamie’s. Didn’t last long, eh? Must’ve been ‘bout a week I reckon and boom, something gone dead in it.’

‘Jamie’s? He driving now?’

‘If you bothered to keep in touch with the boy, you’d know.’

Frankie winces, redirects the blame. ‘That bastard Kevin Smiley. Sells rubbish and calls ‘em cars. He must be laughin’ all the way to the bank when he sees us mob coming.’

‘I tried to tell him. Jamie, I says, _Don’t blow all ya pay on that big heap. Whaddya want with some big motor?_ I arksed him. _Cars eat money._ Yep, I tell him. _All them fellas will be wantin’ you to run ‘em here, run ‘em there and you’ll end up with nothin._ But since when does he listen to his grandmother?’ She glances at her daughter. ‘Jus like his mother, I reckon.’

‘Yeah, well he isn’t doing too bad, my boy, eh? He’s got his job on the boat. And his music. Doin’ good I reckon.’ Frankie wonders if her son’s heard she’s back. When he would show up.

They head along the main street. Frankie’s spirits lift. There’s a group of Yamatji sitting in the shade near the tavern. ‘Drop me here, Mum.’

Dolly ignores her, turns left at the town’s main intersection.
‘Mum!’

‘You’re comin’ with me, Frances. I’ve seen what’s been happenin’ and I don’t like it. A big meeting this one, they’re sellin’ it all off, everything’s gonna go for the development.’

‘Dammit Mum, I really need a smoke.’

‘Someone’ll have em. Anyways, whatdya want with that poison? Jus’ come and listen. It’s time you knew what’s goin on.’

‘Oh, for chrissakes Mum, I’m not gonna come in. Shame job. You reckon I want everyone looking at me, talking about me?’

Dolly stops the ute in the gravelled car park. It’s no use pushing Frankie, who knows that better than her mother? She’s got the brains but no sense, a good job in Perth one minute, drinking and fighting the next.

‘Eh, Cyril.’ Frankie spots her eldest brother with a few Land Council reps.

He wanders over to meet them. ‘Hi Mum. Frankie. You back again? I thought that job was for a year.’

‘Fuck you, too. Hey, you got a smoke? I’m hanging out.’

Cyril looms big over them, a good looking man, despite his white hair and his sixty years. He takes a packet of cigarettes from his trouser pocket, pulls out a couple, puts them in his mouth and lights them, hands one to his sister, looking her over with an appraising eye. She draws back on the cigarette, looks up at him, smiling. She sees him biting back his words. He hands her a couple more cigarettes for afters.

‘Since when has the Yamatji Council attracted all you big wig mob?’ Frankie asks. She hates the politics, the infighting within the community and the bullshit from the bureaucrats.

‘Whatdya reckon— since Vincent Satler started throwing his weight around here again.’

Dolly presses her daughter’s arm— okay, okay, steady girl. Satler’s name still wipes the smile from Frankie’s face, still has that effect on her.

‘Mum told you what he’s up to now?’ Cyril says. Frankie can guess what he’s thinking; how Satler represents everything he’s opposed to, white men and their power, the displacement and dispossession. The rape so many years ago is just one detail in a long list of reasons to hate Vincent Satler. But it isn’t just personal. Any of these money-hungry developers, it’s all the same to Cyril. He can’t understand why she doesn’t do something about it, beat the pricks at their own game. ‘So, little sister, get your arse inside. We need all the help we can get to nail these greedy bastards. You wanna see Satler cry? I’d like to get him where it will hurt the most. No, no, no, Sis! Not in the balls, but where it’ll really hurt a man like him, his off-shore accounts and his bank balance.’

‘Leave her be, Cyril. How can she go inside with all them people the way she is? You gonna
be right, Frankie? Me legs is telling me to get moving and find somewhere to sit. I could do with a cuppa tea before they go on with all the talking.’

‘I’m fine, Mum,’ Frankie snaps. ‘I sure as hell don’t want to hear all that bullshit.’ Alone, she walks towards the sole tree, sits down on the ground under the only bit of shade in the car park. A feathery breeze plays on her skin. She lights up another fag, longs for a drink, prays for the racing in her heart to diminish.

She still prays. She sees the irony of it, sinner as she is. But the dialogue gives her someone to talk to, rail at or beg, and it seems to work; it calms her. She amuses herself for a while watching a colony of ants, throws the hot butt into the centre of it. The disciplined columns confuse, but only momentarily. Order is soon re-established and back on task, they scurry back and forth, back and forth, laden with their cargo.

She must have dozed, for she wakes with a start. It’s good hearing the crows. In Perth, you wake up to the insipid cooing of the doves. Up here birds are in your face, faark, faark, as if they expect you to sit up and listen. She sees that people are outside, moving towards their cars. Vehicles start up. She stays quiet, still, recognizing most of them and not wanting their attention.

Her brother is leaving with his team. Almost imperceptibly, he nods his goodbye. She looks around for Dolly, stretches and clambers to her feet, and stares straight into the eyes of Stephen Satler. She hasn’t seen him in months. She works hard to contain her strength. He smiles. As if she should be pleased to see him. Like father like son. She wonders what he’s doing at the meeting.

‘Howdy Frankie,’ Geoff Harvey calls, before both men get into the car.

She turns away, fumbles for the remaining cigarette, the lighter, drags the nicotine in and waits for the relief she has learned to trust. She watches her mother negotiating the steps of the community centre. How on earth that skinny little woman gave birth to six kids and grew them all up is one hell of a mystery. Her brothers are big men, only Cyril, Victor and Dingo now, but that’s how it is in most families here. Too many gone too young, in circumstances she does not want to remember.

Dolly Watson moves slowly towards her daughter. A strong westerly comes off the sea and her cotton dress flaps around her small frame. In vain she tries to keep her hair in place with one hand, hold back the curling white strands that escape the plastic clasp she uses to keep it under control. In the other hand she carries a paper plate of food, second nature to share the lunch with her daughter. Frankie feels her heart roll over, seize, cry out. This change in seven months. Her mother. She has never had cause to doubt that her mother would prevail over everything. And now this little woman so frail, so mortal.

‘Oh, Frances,’ Dolly says. ‘I’m so tired girl, so tired. This government and this native title.
Proper big mess. Everybody with their finger in the pie.’

‘Leave it, Mum. For god’s sake, you’re not gonna stop it,’ Frankie says, leading her mother towards the ute. ‘You’re not gonna change one damn thing. You’re just gonna wear yourself into the ground. What for, eh?’

‘Too sad, Frances. Too sad. My country. The place where we bin born. Oh, yeah, for years now take a bit of this, take a bit of that. Killin’ our people, moving us on. But we had the Cape, we had something left. “Ere, you mob can have this bitta land, we don’t want it.” They bin give us that one, that little bit of country they didn’t want, useless. And now they’re gonna take that too. They want it all, you know, all the ways. The whole damned thing. And now they’re talking uranium, bigger port, lotsa houses. Economic boost for the region! Jobs for everyone, that’s what that government bloke reckons, money for everyone, whatdya reckon, money lying in the streets and growing on the trees. Money, money, money. Do they think we was born yesterday? Oh, we can still go here, do this, do that, fishin’ and going for tucker, they’re tellin’ us, but what chance eh, with their fancy buildings, their fancy ways. Their fences. Their rules. As if us mob gonna get in.’

Money money, it’s a rich man’s world. The song springs into Frankie’s mind. Never a truer word, she thinks. ‘What’d that fuckin’ Satler boy want, Mum? I saw him. Slipping into that meeting to spy.’

‘Don’t arks me, girl. What do I know? I don’t know nothing anymore.’ Dolly reaches out and holds her daughter’s arm. ‘He looks like his crooked father, but he…’

‘Leave it, Mum. You’re wasting your breath.’ Home for one fucking day; at least in Perth there are places to escape. Here, at home, the maelstrom of politics and family pull incessantly at her. Failure follows her around; half a century of living and that’s been the only constant. Failure. But it never is so hard to bear, she never feels so inadequate, so fucking useless as when she’s with her mother. To turn the clock back, to become a daughter a mother could lean on. A daughter a mother could be proud of.

Before Dolly starts the ute, they sit together a moment, mother and daughter. Frankie sees her mother, fragile, mutable as all humankind, and gives thanks for the knowledge of it. She glimpses with an unflinching clarity that every moment with the old woman is precious. She can only hope the feeling will last.

‘So, you out again all night, or what?’ Dolly asks.

‘Mum,’ Frankie says. ‘Don’t fuckin’ start.’
Cynthia sits on the front steps overlooking the sea with a mug of tea beside her. The headland of low scrub overlooks the long, white sandy beach and the ocean. Later in the day, the sky will be the vibrant cerulean blue of a child’s picture, but in this early morning light it is like the sea, muted and grey. She scarcely has to look to see, she has sat here so many times that the view is an indelible imprint, as known to her as her own heartbeat.

Sometimes she gets up while the morning stars still hang in the sky, but this morning she has slept longer than usual. Although the sun is still behind the house, she can feel the threat of the heat that will overwhelm the day. But the air is fresh now, suffused in the mellow hue of dawn, the white sandhills touched like those old hand-tinted photographs in soft greys and pinks.

It’s usual for her to walk at this time, but today, perhaps after the long drive up with her niece and the late supper last night as Caly and Stephen caught up, she finds she does not have the energy. The tea is hot and she sips gratefully, willing it to calm and smooth away the feelings and the recollections that have taken hold.

How can one know the worth of a marriage? How can such a thing be measured? The quintessential bride and groom. She and Grace Kelly married the same year. She’d shoved the photographs to the back of the linen cupboard years ago but has no trouble in picturing every detail. The long silk gown with the cuffs and bodice fitted with handmade pearl shell buttons, the lace veil sent from Brussels, the soft satin slippers. And her eyes, peering out under white tulle and lace. How naive could a young woman be? It had taken her years to notice that his eyes looked, where? Through everybody, back inside himself?

She’s taken to remembering things. There was a time when she did her best to forget things. Four generations of Marsdens had been at Canterbury when Alec Marsden took over the running of the station. When she had arrived most of them were gone. She knew them, though, in the photographs, in the stories that abounded in town, and in the timbers and stones of the homestead. Oh, yes, she knew them.

Her fingers trace an outline along the surface of the stone steps. Behind her, the wide jarrah planks of the timber veranda circle the low-slung timber homestead. In its hey-day, the white exterior was greatly admired, being one of the few houses not made of corrugated iron. Everything now is dilapidated, with a sense of the whole place, buildings and gardens, disintegrating into dust. But she could not love it more.

In 1940, when the two elder brothers signed up for the war, they were all full of thoughts of
valour and duty; no-one, except the mother who had her own private misgivings, saw what was to come. Alec had joined at the tail end. He had spent the last eight months of the war in the fetid jungles of Papua New Guinea, just long enough to take in the horror of it. There were those who left their bodies and never came back. And there were those who left their souls and never came back. Alec was one of them.

By the time he returned, it had all been arranged. The father and mother stayed on to help work the property, but with no heart. The sisters left home, to marry whomever would take them. The place had come to him by default, the only surviving son.

She’d left for the north with him in the winter of 1956.

Over the years, in his nightly ramblings and his drinking rages, she was able to glean, like a bowerbird collecting fragments, tiny scraps of what he had been through in those years before they met. He rarely spoke of it, not openly, but little by little she came to hear the stories of his war.

The putrid heat, the leeches, the stench of rotting bodies, the fear, these were not things you could put into reasonable words. The only way he could speak them was in anger. The rape sequence came most frequently, to feed his guilt, to dig him deeper into his loneliness. Fearing for its life, the girl had thrown her baby wildly into the air, caught by her mother who stood helplessly watching in the corner of the squalid shed.

He would always see him, his best mate, pushing the legs apart, see them all standing around. Watching. There was one night when he was compelled to tell her this. The remorse. And then a lifetime of reckoning, not being able to sleep, knowing that he should have done something to help the girl.

Young and beautiful, expectant, with no presentiment of what was to come, Cynthia had married him. He could never find any joy and pride in his work, in the place, bound as it was to his father’s dream for his oldest son. Nor was he to find it in his wife.

One long afternoon when things had been particularly bad, she had taken out the photograph and she had trembled and cried at his image, demanding his eyes connect, but there had been nothing. She had seen then the marriage was hopeless, it had been lost before it had begun.

There had been fights, some days she’d screamed and wept until she was too dry for crying. But she believed now they were the better times, the honest times, much more than the endless silences when he withdrew, lost and livid, into his misplaced self, and she escaped into her silent fantasies.

Lying beside him, she had known a loneliness akin to grief. *Like one, that on a lonesome road Doth walk in fear and dread, And having once turned round walks on, And turns no more his head; Because he knows, a frightful fiend Doth close behind him tread.* She can still recite every line;
it surprises her, that such things stay in her memory, despite her diminishing faculties.

The tea’s good, one of the perfect pleasures of life. The dogs sprawl at her feet. The thing that keeps her going is the strong grip of the red earth, and being tossed and carried in the waves that roll onto the beach below the homestead. At least she has that.

Nowadays, men are something a woman can choose to have, or not. It doesn’t seem to matter one way or another to girls these days. They don’t care about getting married.

In Perth, in the fifties, she thought that she had everything. In her circle, girls did not think of having a job as a lifestyle. Unlike the working girls who needed the money, they were well provided for. She’d done a typing course, worked for a while in a firm her father knew. Everyone had known it was just an interim thing, filling in until the real vocation of marriage.

Alec had seemed so interesting. Strong, good looking, his silence made him appear wise and sensible, compared to the silly men who hung around them at parties. He had a directness about him when he spoke, and he only spoke when he had something he wanted to say. Even now, Cynthia could wince with wonder at how rarely her husband articulated anything and, even more singularly, why she should have found that so appealing. It had excited her, that he had shown no response to her friends, to herself, and the animated chatter. She had believed him to be superior.

When children failed to arrive, she had tormented herself with this too, that having no babies of her own was her punishment for being the foolish girl she was, falling for the idea of being his wife, without any understanding of the man she was to marry.

It would be unthinkable now, young women go with whomever they want. Marry after years of living together. Or not. Girls these days think nothing of a man here, a man there. Or even a woman. So simple, so easy.

For most women in her day, fear kept the will strong and the legs shut tight until at least the engagement ring, or more properly the wedding ring. And so girls married men to have a fuck.

‘Bizarre, but true. We got married to escape the parental home. To fuck,’ she says, out loud, and giggles at the preposterousness of it.

‘What’s that?’ Caly comes out onto the veranda.

‘Oh, pooh. I didn’t know you were up. I was talking to myself.’

‘I’m still pinching myself. Coming out of the dark American winter into so much summer.’ Caly stretches her arms high above her head, palms up, and yawns, pupils dilating in the brilliance of morning light. ‘It’s the first sign of madness, you know, talking to yourself. And it sounded pretty racey.’

‘Your uncle hated it, hated me saying “fuck”. It was not the done thing. I must have picked it up from somewhere. Not when we were first married, I had never really heard the word, but later,
when I had learned a few things. I’ll always remember the first time I said it, I thought he’d have a heart attack. It was a statement alright. He couldn’t believe that I could be so brazen. Not like you lot nowadays. “Fuck this, fuck that”. At least I was using it in its proper form, the verb “to fuck”.

‘So, is that why you got married? To fuck?’ Caly sits beside the older woman.

‘Remember it was the 1950s. That must seem like the dark ages to a young thing like you. I was the same as all my friends, swearing just wasn’t the done thing, for ladies. We went from father to husband. From one man who told us what we could do and not do, to another who did the same. When we were girls, to go on a date was a big event. I know you young women joke about it, the way to a man’s heart is not his stomach, but the organ he keeps in his trousers. But in my time, my goodness, it was more than your life was worth to step outside the rules. No pill back then, of course. It was drilled into me by my mother, be good, don’t let them do anything you will regret for the rest of your life. No-one really said don’t have sex, it was just there, you just knew good girls didn’t do it.’

‘And if you did, you paid,’ Caly says.

‘Too right. You saw how they treated the women who did “go all the way”. The huge uproar when they had to get married. The other was unthinkable, single mothers were unheard of. If you didn’t get married, you went away and had the baby. Or an abortion, backyard of course, there was no such thing as a safe termination. And everyone pretended it hadn’t happened. Of course I knew nothing of this at the time, it’s only now I can see how it was. I can still remember this friend at school, Verna Sanderson, lovely girl. Funny, that I can still remember her name after all these years. We were both in the tenth standard. Suddenly she was taking days off school, we heard she was sick, then she disappeared for ages. We all wondered what had happened to her. And then she was back. I saw her occasionally around town. Not in school. She left school. She looked so thin and drawn and eventually I heard she’d married a fellow and gone off somewhere again. I heard later that she had fallen pregnant, been taken away to have the baby. I often wonder what became of her. They took the baby off you in those days.’

‘You still haven’t answered the question. Is that why you got married?’ Caly says, her voice teasing.

‘That’s another thing my girl, the way you young ones bandy things around in public. Nothing’s personal, it’s all out there for everyone to see, nothing’s kept private any more.’

‘Don’t you want me to sign you on Facebook?’ Caly laughs. ‘But really— you never talked about this stuff, with your friends, with my mother even? Anyone?’

‘Privately. Between true friends. But it was completely understood that it was just between us. Especially in a town like this. It took a long time before I felt I could trust anyone. And Maddie
and I, we never talked, not really.’ She takes the hand of her niece, holds it lightly. ‘Not bad eh, our million dollar view.’

‘No, not bad at all,’ Caly says.

But there is so much sky. It engulfs her, Caly feels as if she’ll blow away; there’s nothing to secure her to this thin crust of dirt, nothing to keep her here. A poor night’s sleep has not taken away the discomfort she’s felt since meeting Stephen. She’s carried it into the homestead. She’s been back almost a week, but still the unease grips her.

Coming home. That first step into the old kitchen. Uncle Alec’s chair. Walking towards the door to Maddie’s bedroom, the smell of patchouli oil and mothballs, all the strange yet familiar creaks and shadows of the house. The pink brocade spread across the iron bed in her mother’s old room. Memories she dragged so unwillingly to the surface in preparation for the homecoming, are a distant backdrop to the shock she feels at seeing Stephen again. She had thought that by leaving the US, she would be leaving the mess. But her thoughts and feelings about Vin are as tangible as ever.

‘I love hearing you talk. I’m starved for it,’ Caly says, not sure at all if she means it. Cynthia lives in memories. The last thing she wants is memories—she has come here to get away from them. Caly wraps her arm around her aunt’s narrow shoulders. ‘What’s for breakfast?’ She leaps up from the veranda and spins in her soft silk pyjamas, reeling like a dervish across the grass. Taller, the flowing tresses cut shorter, more sculpted and controlled, but with her mother’s fine bones, her beauty and grace. Cynthia is the only one to have seen her younger sister dance in this way. Madeleine. Not for show, not performing, but moving to music only she could hear.

Caly stops, returns to the shade of the veranda. ‘This fresh air, this view. I could be on another planet. To think that a just a few days ago, I was in a cab weaving through the evening traffic to JFK.’

‘You might miss that glamorous life, Caly. You’ll find it very quiet here, very quiet.’

It won’t be for long, Caly thinks. But she says only, ‘I know I’ve missed living by the sea.’

‘I thought coming back, the house, everything might be a bit much for you,’ Cynthia says.

The old dog Jazz is nuzzling against her shin, pushing a chewed tennis ball at her foot. Caly picks it up, throws it, but before the dog can make a move, the pup has it in its teeth, leaps across the dirt in a curl of dust.

‘It won’t be quiet for long,’ Caly says. ‘Stephen’s told me about the agreement to extend the hub onto the Yamatji Lands. And the road to be routed through Canterbury. Why didn’t you say something?’ And the most important thing, why haven’t you told me about your heart?

Cynthia unfolds her stiff limbs and walks up the steps to the kitchen.

‘Not now, Caly.’ Her caress is like gossamer on the niece’s cheek, her eyes as sad as any lost
creature.

‘You can’t just bury your head.’

‘I’ve never really had the knack for fighting battles. You’re here. You’re the warrior— you fight it. There’s another big meeting coming up next week.’

‘Auntie, I…’

‘Later, we’ll talk about it later. Let’s have a true northwest cook up. None of your bagels and black coffee. The full catastrophe, washed down with a good strong cuppa tea.’
The Memory Room

If Cynthia knows, she has said nothing. Caly has taken to sleeping in her mother’s old room. The room shifts, the folds of the burgundy drapes ripple in the dappled light seeping through the wooden shutters. The smell of the marijuana merges with the lingering scent of patchouli oil, mandarins, cigarettes and whiskey. Her mother’s room. She inhales deeply. It’s good stuff. Caly feels herself sliding.

Cynthia has left the room entirely intact. A shrine. A memorial. As if she’s waiting for Maddie to come home.

‘I’ve thought so often of coming back,’ her mother says. ‘But you’ve been gallivanting around the world. Now you’re back. And here I am.’ Another of Madeleine Bell’s grand entrances.

It’s her own face in the mirror above the dressing table, but all Caly sees is her mother. It’s her mother who half smiles, her mother who lifts her arms and opens them for an embrace. But if her mother were alive, would she ever have reached to embrace her child like this?

Caly draws on the last of the joint. She presses the butt into the leaf-shaped crystal bowl, remembering how it was filled always with potpourri. Maddie was meticulous with it. Caly has forgotten that, her mother unwrapping boxes of cinnamon bark, cedar shavings, cloves, dried lavender and rose petals, orange peel and rosemary, selecting and mixing until the aroma was just to her taste. Deep breath, Caly, she’d say, just like the doctor, deep breath, and her respiratory system would be flooded with the delightfully pungent perfume of Maddie’s concoction. Where are the boxes now? How could she have forgotten? Caly rises from the stool, stands and looks around the shadowy room– a trespasser among her mother’s things.

The wardrobe squeaks as she pulls the door wide. Maddie’s dresses spill from the dark opening, shimmering jewelled gowns, sleek frocks, silk and velvets. Caly cradles the dresses in her arms, presses her face deep into the folds of fabric, breathes in the scent of powder and perfumes, the smell of years gone by. Rows of stiletto shoes are positioned in pairs at the bottom of the cupboard, hats of tulle and feathery flowers arranged on the top shelf.

Stretched like an X on the bed, Caly watches the fan thwat thwat through the air. It can’t be much after sunrise, but already the heat’s pressing in. Two flies lock together. They buzz and bump chaotically against the shutters, then back into the room, against the shutters again, seeking escape.

Tears fill the crease of her eyes, spill, and stream across her cheeks. She coughs, chokes for air. She sits, pulls up the hem of her t-shirt and wipes her eyes, finds that strange stillness that comes after crying. Her head aches. In her mother’s wide, ornate dressing table mirror she sees her own
image. But it’s Maddie that fills the space. Maddie’s beauty, always Maddie’s startling beauty.

Her chest hurts, each breath short and sharp. Seated there on Maddie’s bed, her legs crossed beneath her, Caly wraps her body in her own arms and rocks to and fro. The photograph is on the bed, framed by the brocade spread. Her eyes are pulled to it, she tries to turn away, only to be pulled into it once more. Madeleine Bell. In the photograph she is wearing a scarlet satin gown, flawlessly hugging her breasts and thighs. Caly remembers that evening— a rare trip to Sydney. Her mother’s national tour in 1995. Vin was there. Even then, she recalls, he paid particular attention to her, though she had just turned sixteen. Maddie’s entrance amid flashlights and fanfare had ignited her own self-loathing, her fears, but Vin had been kind, had insisted she be included in the after-show supper.

Caly searches the photograph for something that reminds her of her mother. In life, her mother was so large; these small hands, the tiny feet, the slight stature of the woman in the photograph are far from the image she holds in her mind. Her fingers are ringed with jewellery, and on her wrist, a pearl bracelet. A memory takes shape; her mother’s birthday, Alec holding out the wrapped box, Cynthia moving out away from them to the kitchen, the clatter of dishes. The smile that floats in the air as her mother places the circle of pearls across her slender wrist and holds out her arm for Alec to fasten the clasp.

Caly stares into her own face in the glass. Desolate. The wind stirs the shutters in a sudden gust. Caly turns from the mirror. The photograph lifts from the bed, repositions itself. Jazz and Harry are barking— someone coming? She rises and walks to the door, pulls the cord that opens the shutters.

Jazz is walking across the clearing, careful of his old bones and joints, like Cynthia. Harry is leaping wildly into the oleander bushes that grow in a clump in the corner of the yard. Perhaps they’ve cornered a snake. Jazz moves back towards the shade of the veranda, all interest in the matter gone.

He watches Caly with something like mistrust. Perhaps he knows that she wants only to be away from this place. Even from here she smells the dog. He’s ailing, and weary, and his eyes tell her that quite frankly, he couldn’t care less if she comes or goes.

For the first time, it occurs to her that this might be the same for Cynthia. Hasn’t she seen it all before, their comings and goings? Coming. For what? To replenish, to gloat, because they can? Leaving because they cannot withstand the emptiness, the silence, nor abide the judgements of the small town people. To go to play the game of life where it counts. Not in this backwater. If Cynthia thinks like this, she has never said. Unlike Jazz, her eyes lack such transparency. She’s skilled at not showing what she feels.

The dog rests its head on outstretched paws, sighs a little and closes both eyes. Caly turns
back into the shaded room. The photograph has fallen to the floor. She picks it up, looks again for her mother, but sees only Madeleine Bell. The photograph drops easily from her hand back into the metal biscuit tin that has stored the photographs for so many years, and in a moment it is gone, concealed under the snap of the lid. Caly can hear Cynthia calling. She slips out along the veranda to the bathroom, quickly brushes her teeth, checks her face in the mirror, pats moisturizer under her eyes, rubs the cream over her face and arms.

A wattle bird screeches from the honey-suckle vine that runs along the veranda, loud, insistent. *Change gear, let this go.* She’ll tell Cynthia that she cannot stay here; it’s too hot, too quiet. She’ll tell Cynthia she needs to go. Something’s come up.

Outside, dry dust fills her nostrils, but she tastes the sea in the wind. The light blinds her, even this early, as she makes her way along the veranda that edges the homestead.

Cynthia sits with Stephen at the kitchen table. They eat figs with their fingers, mouths red and juicy with the ripe fruit.

‘Try one,’ Stephen insists.
She sits across from them.
‘They’re good.’ Cynthia holds out the plate.
‘The best,’ Stephen says.

As if she doesn’t know. Fig time— a consolation for the long days of February. Hidden up in the leafy limbs of the ancient tree, she and Stephen poking the mushy fruit into each other’s mouths, like parent birds feeding their hungry young. Squishing the fruit into whatever bared body parts they could find. Until the ants were too much, and the flies. Does he recall such things? Running flat out down the driveway, across the scalding dunes, plunging into the sea.

‘You look tired, darling,’ Cynthia says. ‘Shall I make you tea?’

‘I’ll make a coffee,’ Caly says too sharply. ‘You two, coffee? Or more tea?’

‘I’ve got a plane to catch.’ Stephen’s standing, bending to kiss Cynthia. ‘Don’t get up. I’ll be seeing you soon. Given the urgency, they’ve brought the next meeting forward. I’ll be back up next week.’ He looks across at Cynthia. ‘If that’s alright?’

‘Don’t be silly my boy. You’ve always got a place here,’ Cynthia says. Stephen turns to Caly, moves as if to embrace her.

*Don’t crowd me,* she thinks, turning towards the coffee machine. Their history, everything between them is like a battlefield. She’s not up for a war this morning.

‘He loves to tease,’ Cynthia says later when she complains about his comments the night before. ‘That was just a joke.’

‘Having a female Head of State is a joke?’
‘Oh, Caly, I didn’t mean that, you know I didn’t. And he doesn’t either. It’s just what Hillary represents, another dynasty. He was more reconciled to Gillard than I was, given that she got it so wrong on asylum seekers.’ They sit, drinking their coffee in silence until Cynthia asks, ‘What’s got into you, my girl? You’re like a bear with a sore head.’ She reaches for the plates and begins to clear away. ‘I’d always hoped that you and Stephen…’

‘Don’t, Auntie. Don’t go there.’

‘He’s found a good woman in Ruth.’ Cynthia holds out the tray of figs the colour of plum wine. Despite the long dry spell they are succulent and fat, watered by the washing machine hose for years and years. ‘Try some, dear. They’re full of calcium. I’m going to feed you up while you’re here. It might be all the fashion in New York, but you’re too damned thin and pale for my liking.’
1980
So Much Older

It’s fun at first. The disco is over by ten and the place empties quickly. The other kids squeal and laugh as they run to their parents’ cars. She is so much older. She doesn’t feel like a kid. She wants to party. The pounding pulse of the music from the hall has stopped, the warm, syrupy air saturated with the grinding of a million cicadas.

And there’s Andrew “Swampy” Marsh, and Martin Pyne. He’s got hold of a bottle of something. They are leaning against a shiny green car. The whole town knows Vin has got himself a brand new wagon. The first of the new Holdens in town. The car rocks, music is playing on the stereo. It’s such a hot car. Not bad for a boy not yet twenty. Vin’s like that; a real mover and shaker. Everybody loves Vin.

Frankie loves Vin. Loves the way he looks at her, right in the eyes. He has one of those smiles that promises something special, a just for her look, so that even while she knows he has all the girls in town after him, it feels like it is just for her. It makes her feel like a grown woman.

Frankie takes a good slug from the bottle Martin holds out to her. He opens the door. She climbs into the back. Martin pushes her into the middle, throws himself in close beside her on the slippery vinyl seat. She tugs at her mini skirt. It has ridden up and she tries to pull it down over her thighs without Martin seeing. Frankie can smell the newness of the car. A street lamp sprays a bit of light. Barry Cooper climbs in on her other side. Vin turns around from the driver’s seat.

‘Hello Gorgeous,’ he mouths above the beat of the music. Swampy is sitting up front now, beside Vin. His bleached hair glows orange in the shadowy light. The back of his thick neck reminds her of the bull from the back paddock near their place. She can never decide if she likes Swampy. Mostly she thinks she doesn’t like him, but his dad is the cop in town and she knows this prejudices her. Her kind and cops never get along too well.

Vin revs up the motor and they take off, gravel flicking up along the side of the car. Mrs Hammond, the home economics teacher, is crossing the road with her husband. She stares disapprovingly as they speed by. Swampy keeps turning around, offering her a drink, talking, talking. Frankie thinks he must be already pissed. He doesn’t seem to notice that the music drowns out his voice, like one of those ventriloquist dolls, his head rolling and nodding while the words of the song spew out.

She tries to catch Vin’s eye in the rear vision mirror but he doesn’t want to look at her again. Martin and Baz are urging him on, the car travelling faster and faster, like the rhythm of the music is connected to the motor, to his feet on the pedals. The smell of shaving lotion, a scent she recognizes
from her uncles, a sweet smell, not quite like perfume, manly but sweet all the same, fills the car. Even with the windows wound down, there is no wind. Frankie feels the stirrings of nausea, wishes that the car would stop. She takes another gulp from the bottle. They are pushing against her, leaning into her, their breath thick with the liquor, their laughter loud.

Finally she catches Vin’s eye. It’s dark in the car but she’s sure he must see her distress. He winks back at her.

She’s never felt so small and there’s been plenty of times. Sometimes she sees herself from up on the farthest star, like she is invisible. A speck of nothing. She’s heard the stories. She knows the stories. She had watched unobserved through the gap in the bathroom door, her sister hunched and rigid in the bathtub, stripped to nothing, while her mother and aunties washed her down. She’d watched the bloody rivulets of water mark her, like cuts in her sister’s skin. The older women remonstrated and soothed in turn, all in whispers. It is not as though she doesn’t know.

So, this is how it is to be. She strains to find her will, to find her anger, but she is lost. She can barely think. The car swings from the road, bounces across the rough clearing of the gravel pit. Vin whoops for all he is worth. The car comes to an abrupt stop. The headlights illuminate the scraggly acacias and casuarinas so that they seem to dance in time to the music from the car’s interior. The men fling open the doors of the car and drag her out.
At The Heart

Cynthia thinks best when she is occupied. Her mind comes to life as her fingers prod and knead the cushion of dough. Her memories are a palimpsest of the real and the imagined, cut and pasted over and over again in her mind. To make sense of it, to sort the thing out and then to decide on a course of action; this calls for both her complete attention and her wit. At any moment she will hear the car pull up in front of the homestead and Madeleine will walk through the door. Crying, laughing: it’s impossible to guess. One thing for sure, there will be the grand entrance and their lives here will never be the same.

A door slams. Cynthia watches through the kitchen window as Alec moves to open the passenger door, protective arm on her elbow as he helps her from the car. They move together, pull the bassinet from the backseat. Of course. The baby.

Cynthia scoops a handful of flour onto the tabletop, gently flips the aerated bundle of dough, cuts it in two using the edge of her hand as a knife. She shapes the soft balls of dough and places them carefully into the greased bread tins. Cynthia loves the process of making bread. There is a rhythmic physicality to it. Doling out the flour; tending the yeast with special care to preserve the micro-organisms (the added water not too hot, not too cold); folding, kneading, shaping; knocking her knuckles on the golden loaves for the hollow resonance that tells her they are baked through. Bread making is one of her meditations. Like her walks along the coast, and out through the rocky escarpments and pindan dunes. Body and mind interlaced, her thoughts connected only to the actions of her limbs.

‘Darling,’ Maddie calls before she’s in the room. Cynthia turns and greets her sister. Maddie rushes into her arms. She’s bony, has lost all the weight she carried during the pregnancy. Cynthia releases her little sister quickly; it’s the best she can do. Alec stands behind the new mother, the white wicker bassinet dangling from his arm. There is no sound from the baby, as if she already knows that it’s her mother who calls the shots.

‘I’ve prepared the room next to yours for the baby.’

‘As long as she doesn’t keep me awake all night. She was so restless on the plane. The hostess was great though, to take her up to meet the captain so that I could get some rest. What’s to eat, sister dear? I’m ravenous.’

‘Of course. You are eating for two, now.’

‘Not likely. The little beggar didn’t take to feeding at all, so the nurses have fixed me up with formula. Much better all round.’
'Drink?’ Alec says, holding out a glass of white wine. He has placed the bassinet on the floor between the dresser and the fridge.

‘I’ll leave you to it,’ Cynthia says. ‘I’m in the middle of baking bread.’ She turns to the stove and removes a casserole, then slides the bread tins into the hot oven.

‘That smells all right,’ Alec says. ‘Let’s eat.’

In the living room, Alec switches on the new television. ‘We’ll need a few mod cons now she’s coming to live here,’ he’d said.

They eat in the lounge room with their plates on their laps.

On the news, Maggie Thatcher has a lot to say. Lord Mountbatten has been assassinated and Idi Amin deposed. In Australia, everyone’s congratulating themselves on Kakadu and the Great Barrier Reef becoming National Parks.

‘What a world to be born into,’ Cynthia says.

‘Another load of boat people. We’ll be overrun with the slanty-eyed bastards in no time.’

‘For goodness sake, Alec. I was talking about Kakadu, the National Parks. That they have to put places aside to protect them. What does that mean for everywhere else?’

‘Never enough for you, is it? Whatever they do.’

‘She’s crying,’ Madeleine says.

‘No bloody wonder,’ says Alec. ‘Your sister’s on her high horse again. And Russia’s invading Afghanistan. Have we learned nothing?’

‘Is it time for her feed?’ Cynthia asks, following her sister into the kitchen. Madeleine spoons formula into the bottle, pours in boiling water and squirts the creamy white liquid onto her arm. ‘Too hot,’ she says. She leans against the sink, pallid, entirely exposed under the fluorescent tube. Cynthia places the bassinet on the table and pulls the protesting baby from it. She’s completely unprepared, has no experience of babies. It feels so small and difficult to manage. The baby’s body arcs in her hands, its mouth seeking until it latches onto its own clenched fist, relieved by the furious sucking. 50,000 billion cells, all that genetic material, so much human memory in this one tiny individual. Though she searches the delicately formed features, Cynthia can see no likeness to any of them.

When the mother pokes the teat into the baby’s mouth, she gulps and swallows. The blue eyes widen with relief. The infant sighs, begins sucking in earnest, droplets of the milky formula making small puddles around her lips. In the quiet of the homestead kitchen with the television voices far off, the sisters stand side by side, the sound of the suckling and the infant’s insouciance strangely comforting.

‘Thank heavens,’ Madeleine says. ‘I can’t think when she cries. It’s like a cord to my brain. All reason flies out the window. I’ve never been so tired, Cissy. The whole thing’s been so bloody
awful. I had no idea. Nobody tells you.'

Their eyes meet. Sisters for so many years.

‘Go to bed. Go on, Maddie. Sleep. I’ll muddle through.’

After the bottle, the baby settles in the curve of Cynthia’s arm, pressed against her breast. Tiny fingers grip the edge of her shirt. Lashes, still damp from tears, rest on her perfect cheek. ‘Calypso,’ Cynthia whispers. ‘Welcome home, little girl.’ She lowers the babe into the bassinet and while she tidies the kitchen, the infant sleeps. ‘Well boys,’ she says, as she lets the dogs into the laundry for the night, ‘the balance is shifting. We’ve another girl in the house. And she’s not going to be a push over.’

Cynthia prepares two bottles, wraps them in a thick tea towel to keep them warm for the night-time feed. The baby does not stir as she lifts the bassinet. The lounge room is illuminated only by the greenish tinge of the flickering television screen.

‘Maddie’s gone to bed. I’m off too,’ Cynthia calls to her husband over the noise. He’s heard her; she catches his ‘goodnight’ as she walks on towards their bedroom.

She is in her nightgown, ready to slip between the sheets, when she remembers she’s left her book on the dresser. As soon as she enters the lounge room, she hears them. Even in the dark, she makes them out. Madeleine, hidden in the deep folds of the couch, caresses him with her foot. It rides up from his ankle, along the line of his leg to his groin, and down again.
Washing Day

Dolly Watson comes twice a week. Monday is washing day. The washed linen and the week’s clothing flap in the morning sun. It will be dry by noon and they’ll begin the task of sorting and folding. With Madeleine and the baby here, it has taken longer than usual. Cynthia’s used to her sister making more work, but how can such a little baby create so much havoc?

In Madeleine’s room, Dolly unfolds the sheet and throws it wide across the bed. In unison, standing on either side of the bed, the women bend to press and tuck the sides under the mattress. *Hospital corners, like Mother showed me,* Cynthia thinks. While they work, they hear Madeleine at the piano. A beautiful piece that is familiar to Cynthia. Beethoven, she thinks, though she cannot recall the name of the sonata. They stretch the top sheet neatly and then arrange the coverlet. It is every shade of blue and green. A brilliant peacock stands at its centre.

‘She’s in good spirits now,’ Dolly says. ‘The little girl done some good there.’

Cynthia thinks before she speaks. ‘Maybe. I hope so. She’s a beautiful child,’ she smiles, ‘especially when she’s sleeping.’ The music from the piano stops. They hear the slam of a car door, voices at the front of the house.

Cynthia pulls the curtains aside and looks out of the window. ‘Her good spirits are probably more about him,’ she says, watching Vin Satler walk across the yard. ‘Young and good-looking. On the up and up. He has it all.’

She turns to see Dolly has followed her to the window. ‘Dolly? What is it? You look like you’ve seen a ghost.’

Dolly doesn’t speak. She sits heavily on the made bed.

‘Dolly?’ Cynthia sits down beside her. ‘What is it, Dolly?’ Dolly Watson does not use any words, but her lips press together and she gestures towards the couple laughing together outside the window. ‘Harold Satler’s son? I hear he’s doing so well.’ Cynthia looks again at the other woman. ‘What is it Dolly? What have you heard?’ She picks up Dolly’s hands, soothes them between the palms of her own. ‘We’ve known each other a long time, Dolly. What’s this about? Young Vincent? Tell me.’

‘I’m not crying,’ Dolly says. ‘I’m a tough nut, I am, don’t you reckon? You and me, you know me better than most.’ She cannot meet Cynthia’s eyes. ‘But this. Too much, too much.’

‘For God’s sake, tell me.’

And Dolly does—about the boys, the men who took her daughter, who Frances went out with in Vincent Satler’s flash car. Such a silly, hopeless, stupid girl. What did she reckon on happening?
Sometimes there’s no easy way to move through a silence. At last Cynthia says, ‘Are you sure Dolly, that Frankie… I mean, she’s just a kid. Perhaps there’s been some sort of mistake? What did the police say?’

Dolly jerks her hands away with a derisive snort. ‘She’s a kid, fourteen. Who they gonna listen to?’

‘It’s just so hard to believe,’ Cynthia says, adding quickly, ‘Not that I don’t believe you, Dolly. Of course I do.’ She looks intently into the other woman’s face. ‘You have to report it, Dolly. I’ll come if you like.’

‘No. It’s no use, Mrs Marsden. It’s no use at all. Like you said yourself, they’ll say it’s a mistake. My girl’s word against them boys. The coppers don’t listen to the likes of us. They’ll make a laughing stock of her. She won’t do it. She won’t.’ They are remembering, Dolly, and Cynthia too, the old days, when the Yamatji women were used and traded. At best the police turned a blind eye, though more often than not, they were implicated in protecting the perpetrators, even taking part in the abuse.

They sit in silence, thinking of these things, hearing only the laughter of Madeleine and Vincent through the open window, the playful yaps of the dogs.

Finally Cynthia says, ‘How is Frances? Is she alright?’ There are so many other questions. So much she feels she should say.

‘“You don’t have to go, Frances,” I told her. But she knows I don’t mean it. What else can she do? If my boys, if Cyril, an’ especially Vic, if he finds out, there’ll be hell to pay. Swampy an’ the other blokes, they was pestering her ever since. She had to get the hell out of it. What’s making me weep, my little girl down there walking about them wet grey streets in that city place with no-one looking out for her ‘cept her auntie. And Rosie has her own brood. They all go to school, but, so that’s all right. Frances is at the big high school. Girrawheen.’

‘That’s good, Dolly. That’s just what she needs. To get back on track and put this awful thing behind her. She was doing so well up here. Didn’t she win the English prize last year? I don’t like it though, those young men getting off scot-free. Something needs to be done. I could speak to Alec,’ Cynthia says, but even as she says it she knows it’s not a good idea; he wouldn’t leave it be, especially when one of the men is Vincent Satler!

‘No. Don’t tell no-one. There’s nothing to be done,’ Dolly Watson snaps. ‘I’m just telling you because, well because we’ve known each other a long time. And now your baby sister’s going with him.’ Dolly picks a strand of lint from the tail of the peacock, smoothes the coverlet with the flat of her hand. ‘Well, now you know. But nobody else, you understand? It’s not the same. The police. They see things different. With us mob it’s different.’ Dolly looks directly into Cynthia’s
eyes. ‘Not nobody. You promise?’

In front of the dressing table mirror the two women sit, side by side.

‘I’ll say no more about it, unless you change your mind. I’m so sorry, Dolly. If there’s anything at all I can do?’

‘You’ve got enough on your plate, I reckon,’ Dolly says, ‘with that sister of yours an’ a baby in the house.’ She rises from the bed and collects the used linen from the floor. ‘Best be getting on with it. This old house not going clean itself.’
Filthy black cunt. Fucking black bitch. Lying in the dirt where they chucked her out of the car. Reliving it night after night, over and over. She remembers the bottle in her hand, pain relief, lifts it to her lips, fills her mouth, swallows.

‘Hey, Frankie, guzzle the lot, why don’t ya.’ Billy snatches the liquor and drains the last of it in one long gulp.

‘No worries, girlie,’ the whitefella says. ‘Plenty more where that came from.’ He’s been eyeing her all night.

‘Let’s go. C’mon, Frankie,’ Margaret says. ‘School tomorrow.’

She’s a good girl, Margaret. True sister, that one. When she came down, those first few weeks when she knew nobody except her stupid cousins, Margaret took her in, even though she’s Yamatji, not Noongar. She’d be lost without Margaret.

‘You’re not leaving?’ Billy says. ‘Max here’s buying another round.’ The whitefella’s waving a handful of dollar notes. ‘You stay here. Keep ‘im entertained, sisters. Joey and me’ll go get it.’ He grabs the money. ‘Won’t be a sec.’

‘We’re going home,’ Margaret yells at their disappearing backs.

‘Aw, come on, where’s the fun in that? School, eh? You’re kiddin’ me. You look way too grown up. What you wanna do when you leave school?’

‘As if you give a shit,’ Margaret says, yanking Frankie’s arm. ‘Come on.’

Jack ignores her, looks directly into Frankie’s eyes. ‘You’re gorgeous. You know that? You could be a model, or in the movies. Nothing mundane and boring for you my lovely.’

‘Never seen no Abos in the movies, or parading in the magazines, have you Frankie?’ Margaret says.

‘You could be the first,’ Jack says.

‘Are you coming or not?’ Margaret says. Frankie does not move, but smiles across at Jack half-hidden in the shadowy light. He produces a small bottle of liquor from his coat pocket. She doesn’t even notice Margaret stalk off.
2015
Boom Town

The plane is late and by the time Stephen is in the cab heading towards the office, it’s well after one o’clock.

‘Sorry mate,’ the driver says when they stall again in traffic on the main freeway into the city. ‘Can you believe this crap, so much money, the way they tell it, and they can’t even build a decent road.’

Stephen considers not going in to the office, but what for, what else would he be doing if not working? Caly looks just the same. But she’s not. She’s changed. Any fool can see that. Her mother’s accident maybe, but he’s guessing there’s a man behind it somewhere, too.

A message comes through. More talks. The company was having second thoughts but is showing renewed confidence, now they know that the government does not intend to budge. At yesterday’s meeting, Cyril had them rolling with laughter at his perfect parody of a well-known mining tycoon’s poem on a brass plaque outside a shopping centre. But brass plaques aside, the project is likely to succeed. Embrace multiculturalism, and in the same breath Welcome short-term foreign workers to our shores; this is what they are up against. As if anything short-term can offer what the community needs.

Back at the office, he ties up a few loose ends in the report. He thinks he has something reasonably settled for the feature on AUREN, but when he shows it to Terry Willmot, the editor passes it back, saying, ‘Everything’s changed now. Get your arse over to the meeting. Don’t you get it– they’re not going to let this go. I reckon they’ll push it through today.’ Willmot looks intently up at him from under a bush of white brows and hair. ‘So what’re you waiting for?’

‘The Premier’s interstate,’ Stephen says.

‘All the better. Doesn’t need to be implicated. He can always come back and claim the credit.’

‘Is there no stopping it?’ Even to his own ears he sounds naïve. He wonders if Caly really means to make the film, if she means to stay in the Gascoyne for a while. Willmot’s glaring at him. ‘You’ve no idea Terry, the mess they’re making. When it comes down to it, getting Yamatji to sign agreements by twisting their arm isn’t that different from all the other land grabs they’ve been through. Why can’t it be shelved?’

‘What the hell for? It’s win-win for everybody. Lots of jobs for the Yamatji community if it goes ahead.’

‘There’s more to life than jobs,’ Stephen says.
‘I’ll remember that,’ Willmot snaps, ‘if you don’t pull your head out of your arse and start telling it how it is. There’s just so much of this culture crap I’ll take, Steve. Father or no father.’

‘Fuck you.’

‘And we’ll have none of that sort of fucking language in here neither. Piss off!’

In a cab again, Stephen feels the tiredness that’s been lying in wait, deep in his bones. When he comes back to the city he notices things like the patterning of the afternoon sun on the glass towers, concrete, cars, clumps of people stopping and starting and stopping and starting, clinging together in shoals as they cut across the lines of vehicles that thread under and over the city’s freeways. Earplugs, earphones, eyes downcast, waiting for the signal, waiting for the cars to pass. No-one laughing.

Yes, Cyril had them in stitches yesterday, even when it meant so much to them all. The lawyers, of course, not laughing, dragging them back to the realities of the matter. But really, what did it matter if they laughed or cried? He has no illusions—mining’s got the country by the short and curlies. Perhaps it always did. It’ll be a miracle if anyone succeeds in changing that. Not for the first time, he thinks he should not be in this job. Perpetuating, influencing, doing their bidding. Caly’s work, now that is something. She may not get the message out on a regular basis, only two films in the past decade, but the impact they’re making is ten times greater than anything he’s ever done. But she’s not his father’s child, that’s the difference. He tries to imagine Vin’s face. ‘Stephen’s doing what?’ Even his angle on the hub at Stark Bay flies too close to Willmot’s fine line. Willmot watches his every move, polices him as if he has a direct line to Vin Satler’s mind, Vin Satler’s agendas.

There’s a message from Ruth. Dinner tonight with Andrea Stepaneki and her new husband. She’s probably Andrea someone else by now, changed her name. Stepaneki’s a mouthful. And now that she’s given Nick the flick… He says yes, he’ll be home, but it’s the last thing he needs. Stephen watches from the cab window the development along the foreshore. Cranes dip and nod against the skyline, diggers gouge deep where there was once a wetland. The banks of the Swan River look vulnerable, and there are, of course, no swans. No bird life to see at all, except the shrieking gulls that wheel overhead. The water swirls with brown clouds where the disturbed soil spills into the river. Another of the Premier’s monuments to himself. Not that there’s anything new in that. It’s always bemused him, ever since hearing in primary school how Mrs Dance cut down a tree to mark the city’s founding. Then, and now, the wetlands have been drained and filled with the landfill of flattened hills, limestone rubble trucked in from miles around, and human garbage. It’s upon these foundations the city is constructed. The Noongar were displaced as soon as it became evident that living side by side disadvantaged the settlers and inhibited progress. These stories, of course, are not the stuff of newspapers. Oh, he is definitely in the wrong job.
Nick Stepaneki is taking photographs now, has given up his job working with heritage sites. Too hard, Stephen guesses, when you really care about the consequences of your reports. Years of Nick’s work with the mob to preserve the Burrup in its entirety has come to virtually nothing. As the tycoon’s poem says, billions are crying out for resources. How can the value of a million 30,000 year old petroglyphs compete with that?

Stephen says nothing at the meeting. That’s not his job. He nods at Benson and Taylor, the Yamatji Council lawyers. After the meeting, they go to the bar for a quick drink.

‘Is it really as hopeless as it sounds?’ he asks. ‘I thought AUREN were reconsidering the Pilbara option, but this sounds almost fait accompli.’

‘Unless the Feds intervene. And that’s not going to fucking happen, is it?’ Miles Benson doesn’t look much older than thirty, but he has been around a long time, must be pushing fifty. Stephen’s always glad to be on his side. Not that they’ll win this case, considering what they are up against.

‘What’s your next move?’

‘Can’t really say, Steve. It’s a fucking mess. I don’t think the Yamatji mob understand how close they are to losing any say in the matter.’

‘Is that why they signed?’

Benson hesitates, chooses the words carefully. ‘It was the best we had— or compulsory acquisition and fuck all. At least this way we have a foot in the door.’

‘But AUREN can do what they like?’

‘Well, not entirely,’ Taylor says. He removes his silver-rimmed glasses, shakes out a handkerchief and wearily wipes his eyes.

‘But pretty much.’

‘Yep, pretty much. Our concern is for comp. At least the mob will walk away with some dollars.’

‘If not their country,’ Stephen says. ‘Not much, is it? After tens of thousands of years of custodianship.’ Taylor begins to explain, to make excuses. Stephen puts his glass on the table. ‘Gotta go,’ he says. ‘I told Ruth I’d be back by seven.’

‘You won’t make it,’ Benson says. ‘The traffic’s a fucking nightmare.’

Andrea’s new husband is a short, thickset man with a trimmed moustache and beard. Nothing like Nick, and younger than Stephen’s expecting. They remember meeting somewhere before.
‘Very inbred, WA. Everybody knows everybody,’ the new husband says.

*Everybody fucking everybody,* Stephen is tempted to say, thinking of the time with Andrea before he and Ruth married. Andrea makes a few jibes about his thinning hair. She looks the same as always, slim and sleek. When they were young, she was always the odd one out. He wonders why Ruth persists with the friendship. Ruth comes in from the kitchen carrying a platter. She’s gained weight since the kids, and her love of cooking hasn’t helped. But in candlelight her skin and auburn hair are burnished and full of life.

‘I thought I’d give paella a go,’ she says, placing it in the centre of the table. Steam and flavour waft from the dish. She serves them, offers the salad. ‘A terrible year for prawns but I did manage to get some from Exmouth.’

‘Yes, I heard that. No abalone to speak of and the crayfish have carked it,’ Andrea’s husband says.

‘I hear the incomparable Caly Bell is back,’ Andrea says. ‘How is she, Stephen?’

‘You saw her?’ Ruth asks.

‘Well, yes of course I did. She’s staying at the homestead.’

‘Cosy,’ Andrea says.

‘Not particularly. It’s a very big house.’

‘What’s she going to do?’ Ruth looks at him carefully.

‘Another drop?’ He waves the bottle of red.

‘Is she up there for the protest?’ Ruth asks.

‘I didn’t expect the Spanish Inquisition.’

‘Nobody expects the Spanish Inquisition.’ The new husband is pleased with his joke.

‘Stephen. It’s a simple question. I thought she was coming to Perth for the launch of her mother’s biography,’ Ruth says.

‘If you know, why keep asking.’ He sees her eyes narrow.

*Silk and Silver.* Madeleine Bell inside and out. Definitely worth a read I’d say, especially knowing her,’ Andrea says.

‘I’m surprised Caly can spare the time, that’s all… I don’t expect she’ll be around for long,’ Ruth persists.

‘Cynthia is going on eighty. Of course she wants to spend some time up there.’

‘I bet she’ll get roped in,’ Andrea says. ‘Nick says that the Yamatji mob are going to talk to her about making a film.’

‘You’ve been talking to your ex-husband?’ the new husband says.

Standing to collect the plates Ruth says, ‘I heard Caly was working on a film about that big
spill in New Mexico but the funding was canned.’

‘After New York, working in this little parochial backwater?’ Andrea says.

‘Whatever, I can’t see it doing much good for Stark Bay,’ Stephen mutters.

‘Why do you say that?’

‘I’ve just come from a meeting. AUREN are back in the game. They’re not called Australian Uranium and Energy for nothing. Benson and Taylor reckon there’s little chance of stopping it now.’

‘Oh, no! That’s awful,’ the women say in unison.

‘You’ve been talking with Nick?’ the new husband says.

‘Oh, shut up,’ the women say in unison.

Stephen waves the bottle around, fills each glass to the top.
‘Thought you were bringing Frankie?’ Geoff Harvey says when he opens the door. He’s got a young woman by his side, waving her champagne glass in welcome.

‘Family business.’ Nick looks uncomfortable but before Caly can consider it, they’re inside and everyone’s eye-ball ing them.

‘Calypso Bell.’ Geoff looks her over. ‘You haven’t changed. Brilliant and beautiful, just like your mother.’ He laughs. ‘Not that you’d want to end up like her.’

‘Geoff!’ Pippa Harvey is quickly at his side. ‘Caly. Come on in. I’ll introduce you to everybody.’ Her embrace is warm and welcoming, as if she is genuinely pleased to see her. ‘You probably won’t recognize half of them after all these years. And with all the excitement up here, there’s lots of new faces.’ She leads Caly from the air-conditioned room to the deck. The guests eat with plates balanced on their laps. Caly doesn’t recognize anyone. Pippa herself is unrecognisable, her hair dyed burgundy, her size doubled. But her loud voice sounds just the same. The backyard is filled with screaming kids who run between the adults, playing chase. ‘Caly, this is everybody. Everybody, this is Caly Bell. Filmmaker, singer, legendary beauty extraordinaire.’

‘Eco-maniac of high degree.’ Geoff Harvey is standing in the open doorway.

‘I thought we agreed on a politics-free zone,’ Pippa says with a tight laugh. She leads Caly to a seat. ‘Don’t mind him. He’s been at it since ten o’clock. What would you like to drink?’

But Nick is beside her. In one go, Caly gulps half the beer he hands her.

‘I’m Kaz,’ the woman sitting across from her says, smiling. ‘You’re Cynthia’s niece. She’s told me about you. All good.’ She is strikingly tall, a mass of colour, her rich dark hair wrapped in a plaited scarf of vermilion silk intricately threaded with tiny pearls.

‘You don’t remember me? But we all remember you. Still out there saving the planet?’ the woman sitting next to her says. Her large thighs spill over the plastic chair.

‘From us.’ There’s a snigger from most of them.

‘It’s not that I think climate change isn’t happening,’ the woman beside her says, ‘but not because of anything we’re doing.’

‘Who then? God?’ Kaz says, trying to sound amused.

‘You making a film with the Yamatji mob? Good luck,’ someone says amid hoots of laughter. ‘But you’ll never change this bunch of diehards.’ No preliminaries, no pretence. Caly’s forgotten the accent, and how in-your-face they can be. She takes the second beer someone hands her.
‘She’s here to see Cynthia,’ Nick says.

‘Oh, yeah, pull the other one. We know why you’re here, girlie, with your fucking greenie mates. You can’t win,’ the man by the barbecue says. One of the Marsh boys, she recalls, though she has no idea which one. All of them were stocky like their mother, with bleached hair. He turns from where he is flipping steaks and attempts to stare her down.

‘Just keep your mind on the meat, Bog,’ Pippa says. ‘We like our beef dead but not cremated. You’re always telling us what a top bloke you are, especially in the kitchen.’

‘And the bedroom,’ the tall woman slips in. ‘Not that you can believe anything he tells you.’

‘Sure Kaz. As if you’d know a good root if it fell on you,’ Bog shoots back.

‘Children… the point is, let’s just enjoy lunch without a bunfight.’

‘Get that everyone, she means no talk of greenies, boongs, homos, pollies or reffos. No offence, Nick.’

‘Brendan! Just for once, show some respect,’ Kaz hisses.

‘Yes Brendan, shut the fuck up, there’s ladies present,’ Bog snorts.

‘Is it too much to ask for some civil conversation? We haven’t seen Caly for ages.’ Pippa hands around a tray of packaged dips and crackers. ‘It’s great to have you home, Caly.’

Caly’s overdressed. Except for Kaz, all the women are in baggy shorts and t-shirts. Her skirt is too short, the back of her legs cling to the plastic cushion of the couch.

‘How does it feel being back after so much time?’ Kaz asks.

‘Like she’s been beamed back to the Neanderthal period,’ Brendan says.

Caly hesitates a moment, smiles, says, ‘There’s no reason to suppose Neanderthals were stupid. They were probably among our most intelligent and successful forebears. Western Australia on the other hand, seems to be populated by modern humans at their most dim-witted and destructive. And it’s not pretty.’

Except for the kids, there’s silence.

‘You can’t win,’ Bog says.

‘No,’ Caly says. ‘And neither can you. Unfortunately, we’re all in this together. We’ll all lose.’ She stands, places the empty glass on the table. ‘I’d like to go, Nick. Thanks Pippa. Lovely place you have here. And by the way, what a laugh, Geoff, calling me an eco-maniac. You’re the maniacs, if you can’t see what’s happening to this country.’ Geoff Harvey, though, and the woman who had been with him when he answered the door, are nowhere to be seen.
‘Sorry about that. It was stupid to think it would work,’ Nick says. He stands close to her, their shoulders just touching, looking out over the bay. ‘Pippa means well.’

‘It’s not your fault. I’m used to it of course, vitriol, abuse, though perhaps not usually so crass.’ But even as Caly says this, she knows it isn’t true. All over the world, she brings out the worst in some people. ‘Anyway, what’s the point if I’m not causing havoc?’ she asks.

Stark Bay. What a name for a place once so dynamic, wild and abundant. It is so beautiful; she’s forgotten the intense intimacy she feels here, that’s persisted, despite the changes. Its song is in the wind and all that it touches. In the utterances of the creatures that reside in this landscape. The conversations of the cockatiels as they flit between the branches, and the vibrant budgerigars that bathe luxuriously in the shallows of the freshwater pools that collect in the granite after rare bouts of rain. Yes, and in the dark of night, the hoot of a tawny frogmouth, the haunting wail of dingoes, the thump of the kangaroos as they travel east. There’s music in the creak of boughs, the clatter and clink of brittle leaves, the whispering of the casuarinas. The soil itself makes music; worms, beetles and microscopic organisms dance there. And in the rhythmic movement of the ocean, another kind of song.

But, if the project proceeds, all this will be gone. And in its stead, the clank and rasp of steel against concrete, the scream of the drills, explosions, the sounds of stillness overwhelmed. And the loss she feels is a pain as deep and sharp as a child grieving for her mother, or the lover whose beloved has gone and will never return.

‘Pretty bad, eh?’ Nick says. ‘We never gave it a thought. Remember when we used to swim here. The water as clear as glass.’

‘This is where I had my first dive,’ Caly says. ‘My epiphany.’ And a lot more besides. Her eyes sweep the curve of the shimmering bay, take in the dunes, the remnant reef, south of where the massive steel and concrete structure is being built. ‘We took it for granted.’

‘We were kids. Of course we did,’ Nick says.

Will memories be enough? The wind still blows across the bay, but how will it play its melodies? What songs will be sung in this place? The water is syrupy and opaque, the soil scraped and levelled, the vegetation gone, the varied contours pushed into one single plane. For the concrete and steel.

‘I guess you’ve seen a lot worse. In your work, I mean,’ Nick says. Caly doesn’t answer. ‘Remember those summers? The bay teeming with life. You could see through the water, way down to the bottom of the ocean.’

A pair of ospreys circle high in the updraft, to sight a fish and plunge feet-first into the water below. What can they find, the water thick and muddied and tainted? Only the wily crows loop and
gather on the trees made grotesque, broken and dumped by machines.

‘And in less than what, thirty or forty years?’ Nick kicks at a mound of the dry dirt with his boot. A plume of dust rises, drops at their feet.

‘Do they realise it’s too late?’ Caly asks. ‘Even if they manage to stop the project, it’ll take years to clean this up. They’ll never get this back.’

‘The thin end of the wedge.’

‘Nothing thin about it, Nick. The rise in ocean and land temperature, the decrease in rainfall around here, as if these weren’t enough. But this. This is huge.’

‘The biggest in the world. They’re so proud of that.’

‘Mine’s bigger than yours.’ She smiles for a moment, then says sadly, ‘You know, in *Calypso*, filming around the Mediterranean, habitat loss and degradation, pollution, climate change, over-exploitation of fish stocks, a fucking mess, but compared to this, it seems nothing. This country where water is so vulnerable to begin with, how can it possibly withstand so many pressures?’

‘It’s kind of reassuring to see you so emotional about it. You still care, when you’ve been to so many amazing places. So you are going to have a crack at something here?’

‘I guess so.’ Caly looks into his eyes, questioning. ‘I know more about people the world over and so little about people here. How is that possible, to live half my life in this place and know nothing about Yamatji culture, about Yamatji anything? I didn’t even know that Auntie Dolly... there’s plenty to say. But let’s not get ahead of ourselves. I’m a filmmaker for godsakes. Getting the funding it requires, that’s always the cruncher.’

‘How about *Mine’s Bigger Than Yours*– for a title? Good eh? I loved the films, by the way,’ Nick says. ‘I heard you’re making another one, around the Gulf of Mexico. I always wanted to go to that part of the world, Cuba especially, and the Caribbean.’

*Black Gold.* But not any more. Finito. Kaput.’ Caly’s laugh is strained and before Nick can respond she says, ‘Don’t ask. It’s been axed. Two years of fucking hard work shelved.’ She doesn’t mention Vincent Satler and his money. How he pulled the rug from under her. His early promise, that she would make the film in her own way, that he was just there to finance, came to nothing when he realised she meant to tell it as it is. ‘It’s a long story.’ She mops the sweat from her face with the hem of her t-shirt. ‘I feel so old.’ Nick makes a move to place his arm around her shoulders but she turns abruptly. ‘But hey, Nicko, life moves on. We all move on.’

As they walk up through the ploughed dunes Caly says, ‘You never told Andrea. Did you?’ She glances at him. ‘I mean that had nothing to do with your break-up.’

Nick hesitates, stops and turns to look at her.

‘Who knows what causes these things. Neither of us wanted it, but it’s happened. To be
frank, I’ve never seen the sense in going on and on about why it happened. It’s not going to change anything.’

‘O-kay.’ Caly draws out the last syllable, looks at him candidly. ‘I would have thought you of all people would want to get to the bottom of why it happened. Isn’t that what anthropologists do? Study what everybody is doing and make pronouncements on why they do it?’

‘I am not an anthropologist any more,’ Nick says, annoyed. ‘I gave that up years ago.’

‘Get you into too much trouble?’

‘You could say that. You know the drill better than me, Caly. I certainly objected to white-washing the dubious activities of my clients. I found I had the wrong end of the stick when it came to the role of heritage officers in big mining corporations. And I suppose you are right, in that I began to see… it was… well, to be honest, what I thought I was seeing in terms of human behaviour and social patterns of interaction, what I was documenting, had nothing to do with what was really going on.’

‘The Emperor’s New Clothes?’

‘Something like that.’

‘Is that why you like photographs? The image represents a moment in time, and there’s no disputing the evidence.’ Caly says.

‘You don’t really believe that? Look at your work– constantly under scrutiny and manipulated for the benefit of all and sundry. A good photograph should be ambiguous, should be open to many interpretations. But yes, maybe that is partly what drew me to it. At least the illusion of a sense of capturing something unquestionable.’ He offers her his hand as they climb up the steep embankment to reach the roadway. ‘My Dad gave me the camera. Yes, amazing. You know what an old stick-in-the-mud he was. Here in the land of the free, and yet he never left Odessa. Stuck there. Always fearful that something… that they would catch up with him.’

‘How do you feel about what’s going down there now?’ Caly asks.

‘I don’t. I can’t. He wasn’t so wrong, was he? This business with Putin, it would’ve broken his heart.’ Nick pulls a handkerchief from his pocket and wipes his forehead, his eyes. ‘He was so pissed off when I went into Social Science. He wanted me to do engineering, with something substantial to show for my work. He could not see the parallels with the situation here; displacement, dispossession, loss of culture, of language. So similar to what happened to Australian Aborigines. Then to give me the camera. A beautiful camera. As it turned out he was spot on, giving me a traditional camera instead of one of those new-fangled things, as he used to call them. I’ve experimented with pinhole cameras, too. The digital thing is so not what I want from photography.’

‘I was sorry to hear he’d died, Nick. I meant to get in touch, but somehow, well I haven’t got
a good scorecard in that department.’

‘I saw you didn’t come home for Alec’s funeral.’

‘No. That was wrong.’

‘Why, Caly? It must’ve been hard, when the plane came down. Your mother’s death. So public. So awful. But why leave us? After her funeral, to cut us off so completely. Your friends, and your aunt who loves you more than anyone? Why run off like that?’

She doesn’t have to find an answer. A car pulls up on the roadway above. They hear the door slam and then, standing above them, is Frankie.

‘I’ve been looking all over,’ she yells down at them, annoyed.

‘Got any water?’ Nick asks Frankie as they reach the roadway.

‘No,’ Frankie snaps. ‘But I do have this.’ She thrusts out the Sunday Magazine. Caly’s picture is spread across the cover, the headline bold and unmistakeable. Sleeping with the Enemy.

Caly snatches it from Nick’s hand, scans the cover and flicks open to the double page article. The photographs are of her on Vin’s yacht Osprey, the name of the boat clearly visible. She is barely clad and, it is obvious, intimate with the photographer. She knows of course it is Vin, but what do the journalists know? Scanning the print, she sees the story’s meaning is unambiguous. Caly Bell, one time strident environmental activist, has put aside her latest film project Black Gold; distracted in love, even bought off by the same man who has so much riding on the company’s recovery.

‘What the fuck?’ Frankie screams. ‘So much for solidarity, so much for your fucking credentials.’ Frankie raises her hand as if to strike, drops it again. ‘You fucking white cunt.’

‘Frankie,’ Nick says, his voice quiet, cool. ‘At least let her explain what’s going on.’

‘What? Oh, sorry, it slipped my mind, I’ve been shagging Vin fucking Satler, the biggest suckhole and rip-off merchant on the planet and it didn’t occur to me that it might just compromise me and all that I fucking stand for. And everything I fuckin’ touch.’ Caly does not move, though every part of her wants to run. Her knees buckle.

‘Caly?’ Nick says. ‘Vin Satler?’

Caly tries to form the words but they will not come out. Tears and sweat fuse on her cheeks, evaporate instantly in the heat. She shivers. Her mouth is so dry. She wants to disappear.

They wait for her to speak.

‘You have the right to remain silent,’ Frankie says eventually, ‘but I’m not fucking waiting around for your defence. I’m out of here.’

‘I’ll drop Caly home,’ Nick says. ‘Wait for me at my place. Please. We need to talk.’

‘More yabba yabba,’ Frankie snaps, but throws him a soft smile as she walks away.

‘Did you ever give me a thought, Caly?’ Nick stalks towards his car, wheels around and
strides back to her. ‘Did you ever give me a second thought?’ He moves towards her. She steps back, thinks that he could strike her. ‘Did it mean anything to you?’

‘No strings, Nick. I told you that.’

‘You say that, Caly, but I felt it. Just the same as you did.’

She wipes the sweat, the tears from her eyes. ‘That’s just it, Nick. I don’t feel it.’

‘You don’t mean that.’

‘I do Nick. I always pick wrong. Always. Look at you. You were married, for godsake. And to a beautiful woman who I happen to like. Any relationship I’ve ever got involved in’s gone pear-shaped.’

‘But Vin fucking Satler. Him of all people?’

‘And Frankie? That’s good for you? Last time I saw her she was as pissed as … and she’d been in a fight.’

‘You don’t know the half of it, Caly. Frankie and me, that’s got nothing to do with this, you’re not getting out of it that easily,’ Nick says. ‘It’s a fucking mess, whichever way you look at it. Oh, for gods-sake, let’s get out of this goddam heat.’

In the cool of the vehicle Caly cries quietly and does not speak until Nick pulls up in front of the homestead.

‘Frankie’s right, who you fuck is your own business. But your profile, your reputation, we were counting on that. Vin Satler? Why Caly? Why? You can have anyone you want.’

‘I’m sorry, Nick. About everything. I will tell you, it’s just that I can’t seem to find the words just now.’

There’s hurt, but no longer a sting in his voice. He turns to her. ‘Does Stephen know?’

‘Of course not!’ Caly exclaims, but doubt floods in. ‘I don’t think so. Vin’s very private.’ She still cannot look at him. ‘We were very discreet.’

‘Obviously,’ Nick says. ‘So discreet it’s made the front page. It’ll go viral, you know that. Somebody wanted the world to know. But who?’ They sit in silence, both of them considering this. She sees his hand move towards her, then away, wanting to comfort her. Suddenly he says, ‘It’s funny how things that go round come round. This situation reminds me of Gribble.’

‘Who?’

‘In the 1880s, Pastor John Gribble was sent up here by the church. You know how it is, Aborigines, pastoralists and police. He wrote an extraordinary booklet entitled Dark Deeds in a Sunny Land. You should read it. I’ll get you my copy.’

‘What’s that got to do with it?’

‘He was accused of being a liar and a canting humbug and was run out of the state with his
tail between his legs. All in a few months. The powers that be and the locals all against him.’

Cynthia calls from the veranda, then waves and heads back inside. ‘Oh god, how will I tell her?’ Caly murmurs.

‘Better coming from you than what she’ll hear in town,’ Nick says.

Not for the first time, she’s grateful for the design of the homestead with its long wide verandas and the bathroom attached to the side of the house. When she greets Cynthia in the kitchen she is freshly showered and changed, and settled by her pills.

‘Was that Nick?’ Cynthia smiles, hands Caly a large sandwich on a plate. ‘I’ve made tea.’

‘Thanks.’

‘What have you two been up to?’

‘Nothing.’ She sounds like a defensive schoolgirl.

They eat their sandwiches in the kitchen; just the rush of the afternoon sea breeze, the flapping of the veranda shutters to cut into their silence.

‘Auntie, I need to talk to you.’ The tears come involuntarily. ‘I am so ashamed. I have let you down, let everybody down.’

‘Spit it out girl—tell me.’

‘I don’t know where to begin,’ Caly cries.

‘At the beginning,’ says her aunt. ‘That’s the very best place to start.’
Moon Dance

When Kaz Kennedy draws up in her old car, Caly and Cynthia are sitting on the veranda catching the early breeze off the sea. She’s startling in rainbow colours, her long dark hair braided and beaded. Her womb is a neat bundle pressing against the silk.

‘I had no idea,’ Cynthia says. ‘How did that happen?’

‘Cynthia, if you don’t know by now, I’m certainly not going to alarm you with the details. I bet you thought it was a beer belly, Caly, like everyone else in this place. Right?’ Kaz laughs. ‘I was so embarrassed the other day—Pippa and Geoff’s friends. But we’re not all rednecks, are we Cynthia?’

She’s bearing fresh baked banana muffins and fragrant oils. On the shuttered lounge room floor she arranges Caly on a handwoven mat, a silk cushion under her head, a bolster under her knees. Pan pipes play softly from the ipod she has set up beside them. As Kaz pummels and kneads each foot, then moves through each chakra, Caly closes her eyes and succumbs, lets the young woman work her magic. It is so unexpected, this kindness.

Afterwards the three women sit on the rattan chairs and watch the shifts of colour in the late afternoon sky.

‘I never tire,’ Cynthia says. ‘This view will be the last thing I think of when I go.’

‘How many years?’ Kaz asks.

‘Long before you were both thought of,’ Cynthia says. ‘Another century altogether.’

‘Did you love it straight off? Or did it grow on you?’

‘Both, I think. I loved the ocean, the view of course, but when I first came, I knew nothing of the life here. It’s taken years to get the full picture. I couldn’t tell you all the things here that I love. My bounty is as boundless as the sea. My love as deep; the more I give to thee, the more I have, for both are infinite. Ha, how’s that? And you all think I’ve lost my marbles.’

‘That’s not fair. You were taught Shakespeare, you were taught how to memorise,’ Caly says. ‘Anyway, why bother with remembering when we’ve got Google?’

‘Someone’s coming,’ Kaz says. They watch as a white four-wheel drive pulls up and Pippa climbs out. When Caly barely suppresses a groan, Kaz says, ‘She’s okay, actually. I know, married to Geoff Harvey, all the hoo-ha he goes on with, but she’s … in her own way she does what she can to put a stop to things. And that’s not easy up here.’

‘It’s not easy anywhere,’ Cynthia says.

They measure Pippa’s progress along the veranda as the jarrah floorboards recoil at each
footfall.

‘What the fuck?’ She flings the magazine onto the table. ‘Vin’s boat, that bit’s easy to figure, but why the hell would you be on it?’ The cover photograph sits among them: disturbing, though ridiculous too. ‘What does Stephen think about this? Another heap of crap from his goddam father.’

‘How would I know?’ Caly says sharply, taken by surprise. ‘I don’t give a shit what Stephen thinks.’

Pippa’s brows rise to meet the fringe of her hair, drop again. Her voice firm, matter of fact. ‘You should. He’s a journalist. His father owns the paper. He knows his father. He knows you. He cares about you.’

Caly turns away, looks out to the horizon.

‘She’s right, darling,’ Cynthia says. ‘Stephen might know what it’s all about.’

‘For all we know he’s behind it,’ Caly says.

‘Bullshit. You don’t believe that, not for one second,’ Pippa says. ‘You of all people… Stephen would never do that to you.’

‘That’s true Caly. He’s nothing like his father. He cares so much for this place,’ Kaz says. ‘Stephen’s been working with the Yamatji Council to put things right. He’s totally against it. The hub’s been Vin Satler’s baby from start to finish.

‘Too right. That bastard’ll do whatever it takes to get what he wants,’ Pippa says. ‘What did you do, Caly? Disagree with him, tell him to stick it? Vin Satler doesn’t take kindly to people who don’t do what he says. Still, you probably know about that better than any of us.’

‘For once in your life, shut up, Pippa.’ Caly turns back to face them.

‘No, I won’t. For once you should listen. We all know you’re used to being the centre of attention, but believe it or not, this isn’t just about you. We’ve got a right to know. Were you? Fucking him?’ She goes on, her anger mounting. ‘What right did you have to come blundering into our town like you’ve got all the answers?’

‘I did not!’ Caly pushes back the chair and stands. ‘Do you really think I wanted to have any part of it? After the things I’ve seen? Knowing what I know? Last year I went to Lake Poyang in China and saw first hand what we humans are capable of. Where once there was three thousand and five hundred square kilometres of freshwater, there’s desiccated mud. For as far as you can see, every living thing gone, even the villagers who used to live off the fishing. The year before that, it was the Mississippi Delta. The year before that it was the oceans. It doesn’t matter where you look, over-exploitation. Greed.’

‘Better get yourself a new travel agent,’ Pippa says.

‘What? Has it even registered with you— that people are losing their homes as rising seas
swallow up the islands in the Bay of Bengal? All over the Pacific? It’s as if you think it’s nothing to do with you, what’s going on in the rest of the world. But it’s connected. Surely you can see that? The hub will go ahead because obscenely wealthy people in boardrooms across the world say it will. I said right from the beginning it’s pointless trying to stop it. There’s only one reason you won’t get your hub and it’s got nothing to do with you, me or anyone else. It’ll all come down to where they want to put their money, or the price of uranium, its market value. And guess what, with Australia selling uranium to India, the prices are up. And it’ll be like that for as long as people like us are willing to consume what they have to sell.’

‘You still haven’t explained this,’ Pippa snaps, picking up the magazine again and tossing it down.

‘I’m not going to explain anything to anyone. I don’t have to. My life’s my own. Unlike you, latching on to Geoff Harvey. For what? The security of a house, his pay packet, a couple of kids? It couldn’t have been for his charm, or his loyalty to you, because he has none.’

‘Girls.’ Cynthia reaches to take Caly’s hand.

‘Don’t.’ Caly pulls away. ‘I’m not a child. If you’d stood up to your little sister – you let her walk all over you. If you’d been stronger, not let her have her own way all the time, not let her mess around with, with other people’s husbands, I might have gotten to have a mother.’ In the silence, her heart thumps so loudly that she cannot believe the others can’t hear it. Her throat is dry and ragged. She slumps down in the chair. On the table she lays her head in her arms and cries. Short sharp sobs that offer no relief.

The telephone rings. Cynthia pulls herself up from the chair and walks along the veranda into the house, her face ashen.

‘Should I go with her?’ Kaz asks.

‘No, leave her,’ Pippa says. ‘Look, Caly. I’m sorry. Vincent Satler, he’s hurt so many people. I never dreamed you’d be one of the ones to fall for him.’

Kaz moves to Caly. She gently massages her shoulders, runs her fingers through her hair.

‘Here, wipe your eyes,’ Pippa says handing her tissues. Caly checks her breath, quietens, until they sit with only the crash of waves along the shore below the homestead, the plaintive calls of the cockatoos roosting in the eucalypts from the afternoon heat.

Pippa hums the tune of the song softly at first, then gaining momentum, smiling, grinning at Caly until they both collapse in laughter.

‘Givin’ it to the married men, the married men,’ Caly sings, her voice stretches in a bluesy growl into the afternoon stillness.

‘My Mum, she loved that song. Remember Caly? She played it all the way to Perth that time.
I wonder what that was about?’ Pippa says.

‘Better not to know when it comes to your mother,’ Kaz says.

Caly catches her eye, sees the comment isn’t about her.


‘Did she sing that?’

‘Not that I remember. All that time in hell to spend, for kissin’ the married men,’ Caly sings, teasingly.

‘It’s not funny. Is it? I don’t get it. Why Caly, why do that to yourself?’ Kaz says.

‘I was a kid, the first time. The second time– love, lust, no excuses.’ Why is she telling them this?

‘I’m confused. The second time?’

In the silence they hear Cynthia clattering teacups in the kitchen.

‘Well, yes, I went to New York when school finished, spent fall and winter before I came back for uni. Then, when my mother died he was there– he knew so much that I didn’t know. About my life, about me.’ Caly glances at Pippa, who has known her too, all her life. She sees sincerity in her eyes, feels the trust of their old friendship again. ‘I loved hearing the stories he had to tell. I’ll always be grateful for that, I don’t think I would have got through.’

‘But that was years ago,’ Pippa says, unable still to cover her shock.

‘Longer than I want to remember.’

‘And you’ve been with him ever since?’

She’s never confided, the way most women do. At boarding school, girls curled together in their beds, whispering. Her friends in New York are quite happy sharing their lives on Facebook. But, now, in a way she cannot explain, she needs to tell them about him. ‘

‘On and off’ she says cautiously. ‘We were never really together. If he wanted to see me he’d call …’

‘And you came running,’ Pippa says

‘The classic father figure,’ Kaz says.

‘Sugar Daddy, more like,’ Pippa says. ‘Are you sure, he’s not … I’ve always wondered.’

‘Oh, for godsake Pippa, do you really think, given everything…’ Caly twists the ring on her finger. ‘They met, Maddie and Vin, after I was born. Cynthia’s told me that much.’ She looks at them both, her chin firm. She’s about to say that she’s never had anything from him, but sees now that it isn’t true, how naïve she has been. His money, his influence, it’s all been part of the affair.

‘It’s okay, we’re not judging you,’ Kaz says.

‘That’s what you think,’ Pippa says. But Kaz ignores her, moves again to stand behind Caly
and massages her shoulder muscles, this time with deep, strong strokes.

‘I find talking about things so cathartic,’ Kaz says quietly.

They stay still, listening to the roll of the surf, the birds, the wind. Eventually, though, Caly says, ‘Why he’s done this, it’s because he thought the funding for Black Gold would buy him the film he wanted. I’ve never seen him so pissed off, when he first saw the takes. I saw a side of him I’d never seen before, even though everyone said he…. This…’ she points at the magazine, ‘it’s about Black Gold. It’s important to me that you know that.’ And the best way he could get at me. To stop what we are doing here.

‘What happened?’ Pippa says. ‘I mean, why are you so sure it’s over? You are sure, aren’t you?’

‘I’m sure.’ She couldn’t tell them about before she had left for Australia; giving him head, him laughing out loud. ‘If only your friends could see you now,’ he’d said.

‘Still, New York! All those concerts, the things you’ve done. It must have been amazing, living over there. At least you had that. Me, stuck here in Starky with Geoff fucking Harvey,’ Pippa says as they hear Cynthia moving back along the veranda. She’s carrying a tray, sets down the large teapot in its crazy patchwork cosy. She carefully places the four cups and saucers, a bright blue jug of milk, a sugar bowl and a plate of Anzacs on the table.

‘Shall I be Mum?’ Pippa says.

They sip the tea. Conscious of her strength and wisdom, Caly reaches for Cynthia’s hand.

‘I’m so sorry about what I said,’ she says.

‘No need,’ Cynthia says. ‘There’s truth in what you say.’ She squeezes Caly’s hand, saying to the others, ‘I’ve unplugged the phone, her mobile thankfully doesn’t work out here but the computer’s flooded.’

‘Good or bad?’ Pippa asks.

‘Bad!’ Caly says, sitting up. ‘And good. But there’s only so many you can take.’ She’s thinking of the emails from Stephen she hasn’t opened.

‘It was such a shock.’ Pippa picks up the magazine and turns the photograph face down. ‘You must have really rattled him.’

Kaz stands, stretches her arms, the palms of her hands coming together in a peak above her head, and says, ‘For what it’s worth, I want to suggest something completely radical.’


‘Let’s go for a swim. It’s the best time of day.’

‘She’s right, girls. Sitting here stewing over it will achieve nothing. I’m game for it.’ Cynthia rises from her chair. ‘I’ll grab some towels.’
‘I haven’t brought my bathers,’ Pippa says.

‘Bathers! What do we want with bathers?’ Kaz shrieks. Soon, towels flung over their shoulders, they head down the path toward the dunes. The sultry air shifts against their limbs, the breeze fans the sweat on their bodies. At this time of evening, the sun low on the horizon, the sky is streaked with the softest hues of pink, orange, gold and violet. Salt, seawater and Kaz’s fragrant mix of patchouli, rose and frangipani oil drift on the air.

‘We could be the only ones left on the entire planet,’ Pippa cries, floating on her back, her legs and arms widespread, her large breasts bobbing with the motion of the water. In a pod, like dolphins, they drift with the current, gazing up into the limitless sky.

Afterwards, they sit in an arc along the dune and watch the sun slide away, the beguiling moon suspended in the indigo sky.

‘Pretty good, hey?’ says Pippa.

‘Beautiful. Thankyou, all of you,’ Caly says. In her mind she hears her mother’s recorded voice: *Oh, Moon high up in the sky*. She will never sing like her mother.

But she has her own songs. Caly sings the first line softly. *Blue moon, you saw me standing alone, without a love of my own …* All of them, shyly at first, not wanting to spoil the beauty of her voice, join her. They sing until stars spill across the sky and the night is upon them.

The screams of the wild birds saturate the air. The waves crash at their feet. Freed from words. *After silence, that which comes nearest to expressing the inexpressible is music*– Caly’s heard this somewhere. And she believes it.

They take it slowly, Cynthia’s breath labouring as they climb up the dune. In the darkness, with the canopy of stars to guide them, Caly takes her aunt’s hand. They laugh all the way back to the homestead.
Release

The water is warm and swells in long, languorous waves. Her body cuts through it. Each stroke releases. Memories. One by one, she leaves them churning in her wake, her arms reaching forward, beyond recollections, beyond their hold on her.

Breathing steadily, relaxed, she spins over onto her back. Above her, the sun gleams in the immense blue of the sky. The water sways as gentle as a breeze and holds her aloft. She feels again that soaring freedom only the ocean can give. In the updraft of wind an osprey rises and falls, circles and dives. Rises again with a mullet struggling in its implacable grasp.

The sea here, far from the advance of the port development, is so clear she sees the reef fish and thinks of her gear back in the boot of the car. Coming down was an impulse. She’d told Cynthia she was going into town to pick up some wine. But now she is away from the house, she can’t stop thinking about Stephen— all that baggage they carry. And her recollections of Vin, Maddie, Alec, all of them crowding each other, crowding her. The image of Maddie a reminder of how she must strive, and shine and win. Such a mother. And Vin, who took the world by its ankles and turned it upside down and shook it until he got everything he wanted.

She flips over, starts kicking again. Her arms move effortlessly through the water, no resistance, no pain. She remembers the first time swimming with a whale shark, when she was a girl. It had all started here. The world’s largest fish; she’d never forget the sheer size of it, and the brilliance of the abstract patterning of spots and stripes. Beyond anything in her imagining. She’d not known then what she knows now. That the mother nurtures the pups within her body until it is time for them to go it alone. That it takes a whale shark about twenty-five years to reach sexual maturity. That it costs $10,000 for a fin in a bowl of broth in a Chinese restaurant. She hadn’t known then about the extensive loss of habitat worldwide, the injuries from shipping. If she met a whale shark today, well, that would really be something.

A small pod of dolphins swims close. She tries to keep up with them but they leap and plunge and move out of range. She swims on and on until the shore is a white filament fusing sea and sky. Around her, acres of blue. Salt seeps into her eyes, her mouth, the rifts and folds of her body, cleansing and renewing. Laughter wells deep within and though she cannot let it out, joy and release fill her. If she went now, if this was how it was to end, it would not be so bad.

When she gets back to the homestead, Cynthia tells her that Auntie Dolly has called, that the women are taking her out bush tomorrow. She tries to think of excuses but of course there are none, other than her fear.
'Who’ll be there? Frankie?’ she asks.
‘Oh, who knows with Frankie. She could be anywhere. Probably.’
‘What’s she like, Auntie?’
‘You know, she reminds me of Carmen. She’s a survivor, Frankie.’
‘Not like Bizet’s *Carmen*, then. They got her in the end.’
‘Of course, you’re right, not like Carmen. Untamed, though. Despite what life’s dished up to her, there’s a certain wilful ability to fight back,’ Cynthia says.

Later, Caly showers and dresses in sage-green silk. She prepares a meal for Cynthia, pasta with her homemade pesto, a salad. Cynthia seems happy and relieved when she discusses what she will need for the bush trip. At least she can do this for her Aunt. Now that she’s decided to leave.

But when she tries to broach the subject of leaving, Cynthia says, ‘I know, you can’t stay here forever. When I go you’ll leave this place. There’s too much pain here.’
‘Without you, there would be no reason for me to be here.’
‘But I am here. And here you are.’
‘I’ve made such a mess, haven’t I? I knew coming back was a mistake.’
‘You’re like your mother in one respect,’ Cynthia says. ‘When trouble strikes, you run. Not this time Caly. Stay for a while longer. For me.’
‘How long?’
‘Is a piece of string? I don’t know, sweetheart. Not for long.’
After Rain

As the car veers from the bitumen, Caly leaves behind that place of childhood holidays. It happens so fast. The Toyota hurtles along the narrow dirt road. Low scrubby vegetation, bleak, dried up hills worn down with the years, these are alien. The gleaming white sand of the beaches morphs to red pindan dunes. All those years and she has never headed east, has clung, like everybody else, to the little township by the sea.

Caly sits in the back seat with Auntie Dolly. Beryl, sitting in-between, spills across the seat, melon-breasts and massive thighs barely contained by her worn cotton dress.

‘Always stay close to the land. Know it like you know yourself,’ Dolly says to anyone who’s listening.

‘Geez Mum. As if we don’t want to. But you still need the dosh to pay the bills.’ Frankie has heard it all before.

‘Money’ll slip through your fingers like sand. You mob always rushin’, rushin’.’ Dolly looks out of the car window at the trees and hills slipping by. She has seen them so many times they are imprinted on her; she could tell you about each of them one by one. ‘Land’s solid. Land’s goin’ nowhere. Them hills, them trees. The waterholes. Them things you can depend on.’

It had cooled down after the rain, but this morning it’s sticky and hot. Joyce, her face marked from battle, her hair untamed and smelling of mutton fat and smoky fires, steers the four-wheel drive, unfazed. She knows this road, negotiates with ease lakes of brown milky water, deep ruts in the mud from earlier travellers. Frankie, smaller than the other women but somehow more imposing, sits in the front passenger seat. Caly catches glimpses of them in the rear-vision mirror. Frankie is speaking to Joyce, but it is impossible to hear what she is saying. The car rattles and shakes over corrugations.

‘It’s the best time. Good tucker everywhere,’ Dolly says. Rain up here never goes unnoticed. Joyce drives off the rough road, weaves the vehicle through scrubby trees and kills the motor and the air-conditioning. Outside the car, a wall of burning air presses against them. Caly pulls on her calico hat. She glances at her cell phone. It’s still out of range. Frankie stands beside Dolly, shakes a cigarette from the packet, lights it, inhales deeply. She’s more worn than her mother. Prickly, tough, but at the same time more vulnerable.

‘Is it okay to take photos out here?’ Caly asks. To break the silence. To make something happen. It’s when she’s still and quiet she aches the most.

‘Sure,’ says Beryl. ‘Long as you don’t take one of my backside.’ Laughter echoes along the
embankment of rocks above them. The wind catches in the branches of the mulgas and the paperbarks. It reminds Caly of time, of timelessness. She tries to identify various bird calls; anything to keep her mind busy. He’s like a microchip in her brain, a fragment of glass in her heart. Except for the birds and the song of the wind, there is silence. An unexpected shyness has settled in her, but all the same she’s glad of the company of the women, out here so far from anywhere.

Together they walk a short distance from the car. The women make camp in a large sandy clearing at the base of the escarpment. Caly can’t help but look upward along the ancient layerings of the red rock wall to the brilliant blue disc of cloudless sky. She wills herself to relax, to feel easy in the place. But the knowledge that she has no sense of north, south, east, west, that she could never find her way out of here, that she is in country so foreign, feeds her apprehension.

The women have a fire going. Beryl throws on a couple of kangaroo tails bought, fur and all, from the freezer in the store in town. The skin curls, fat sizzles on the coals. Lunch. Caly barely dares think about it. The heat pressing her skin, the patois of the women's talk. She understands almost nothing.

“You go with Auntie,” Joyce instructs. She juts out her plump bottom lip towards the direction they are to take.

The other women head off and soon the thud of spades and crowbars, the occasional burst of excited laughter, ricochet off the cliffs. Dolly Watson scrutinizes her charge, skinny and tight, as jumpy as a rabbit. The girl has a lot of learning to do.

“Come.” The Yamatji elder’s eyes survey the bare ground. Caly has known this woman all her life and yet she’s never appreciated it before; Dolly Watson embodies that certain strength, humour and warmth, a groundedness and self-possession that immediately commands respect. She has encountered this in indigenous elders in so many parts of the world. ‘We find one big perentie,’ Dolly says.

Though Caly sees nothing, Dolly has located footprints. She sets off at a brisk pace in pursuit of the creature. When the chase begins in earnest, Caly struggles to keep up. Fit as she is, Dolly’s skill and experience put her far ahead. Out here, it seems, her youth is of no consequence, or if anything, a drawback.

At the mouth of the burrow, Dolly grabs the spade and begins the laborious process of digging out the animal. Caly, tense, appalled, hovers back. There is nothing else she can do.

‘Not long now, soon we have ‘im.’

And then it’s there. The goanna’s head lifts proudly. About a metre from head to tail with strong muscular forelegs and haunches, the magnificent reptile calculates escape. But in a motion Caly cannot fully take in, Dolly deftly lifts and swings it by the tail from one hand. After a few
whacks on the head, the perentie is dead. Limp and lifeless. It’s that quick.

They walk back to the camp in silence, the elder’s energy spent, Caly speechless. Back at camp, the women spread out their haul of grubs, bush tomatoes, yams and onions, a few smaller goannas. While the other women prepare the bush food, Dolly sits glowing with satisfaction in the shade. She pours strong black tea into her pannikin. Following the others, she dips chunks of warm damper that the women have carefully baked in the ashes into the hot liquid.

Caly smears tears and dust with the corner of her shirt. If she were alone, she’s sure of it, she could howl out here, a rabid beast. The women seem to expect nothing from her. Her credentials, her successes and failures count for zilch. All the years she’s been away have melted to nothing. Here time moves slowly. And nothing seems to matter but being here. Worn out, consumed by the heat, she feels the stirrings of a letting go, the contentedness of the women.

‘When we was kids go footwalk across country, a long, long ways. Parents teaching us all ‘bout right foods in them days. No rubbish food, no takeaway. We were one healthy mob,’ Dolly tells them. ‘In them old days lots of dancing, to make kangaroo, bush turkey, everything we need. Go get kararra seed, spinifex and grind ‘im up on the stone an’ make damper. That’s a long time ago when the rockholes were full with clean water and you could collect wild onion, good those ones, and wild oranges even, and there was wild currants, you shake the tree and get a pile from just one tree. So much good tucker all gone, them bullocks and sheep they take the lot. And when Yamatji get hungry and maybe take a sheep or two, terrible things happened. Flogging, shooting Yamatji. Cruel the whitefellas in those days.’

‘I’m so sorry,’ Caly says.

‘Long time ago,’ Dolly says. ‘No good thinking too much now.’

‘But those stories, Mum, they shouldn’t be hidden,’ Frankie says. ‘People should know what happened up here in the old days.’

The perentie they bake slowly in a trench dug out under the coals. When Frankie hands her a piece of white flesh, Caly knows there’s no way out, bites into it cautiously but finds that if she keeps her mind still, it tastes much like chicken. She’s getting to like Frankie, now she has gotten over her fear. The woman has a quiet intelligence beneath her crusty surface. When Caly admits her ambivalence at the killing of the perentie, Frankie, rather than dismissing her, explains patiently about the traditional skills of hunting, and the value of bush knowledge to her people. The other women listen, looking proud of what Frankie has to say, proud of the easy way she talks strong with a wadjela.

‘Take walkabout,’ she says. ‘Walkabout is quiet time, a time to listen, a time to learn all about spiritual things. It’s in the wadjela religions, in the church, and those fellas like in India.’
‘A pilgrimage,’ Caly suggests.

‘Yeah, like that. Walkabout is a wadjela word. For something they don’t understand. Hear most people talk about it and they make it seem nothing, just blackfellas being slack, lazy, shirking their obligations for some primitive urge to go bush. But it wasn’t like that.’ Frankie picks up a twig and smooths the rich, red sand with her hand. She draws a deliberate pattern of lines and circles on the blank surface. ‘It’s a time of devotion, a spiritual journey, when a man, or a woman too, goes walkabout, making maps in her head, through the songs. Learning her country, learning who she is. If you know the song, you know the country. Time for listening. To all things.’ Then she adds, as if to herself, ‘Even her aloneness, even her sadness.’

They sit without words for a while, hearing again the activities of the birds; wattlebirds squabbling, the ubiquitous crows, the rasping breath of parrots in the hot afternoon air. And the wind, weaving through the branches and leaves, recalling to them other lives, other stories.

For dessert, they take mouthfuls of delicious honeycomb, like bright yellow baked egg, and dripping with the honey of the native bees. Languid in the afternoon heat, they drink strongly brewed tea from large tin pannikins. So many questions Caly wants to ask float out of reach.

‘I’m going to learn you bush food and bush medicine,’ Dolly says firmly when they are in the car heading home.

‘We’ll take her to the paintings, eh, Mum?’ Frankie says. She turns, looks at Caly.

‘Thousands of years old.’

‘Better go quick, girl,’ Joyce says. ‘Before that mining mob grabs it all.’

The road home is a red ribbon unfurling before them. The Toyota skims over the corrugations through soft-hued vegetation, framed by purple hills patch-worked in spinifex, stitched with white stone. The early evening light illuminates pots of gold along the horizon, casts mysterious shadows upon the land. Privately, Caly chuckles. All that therapy has not been lost. She knows how the mind can turn everything around. Out of the corner of her eye she studies Dolly Watson, dozing in unreserved peace. As we are liberated from our fear, our presence automatically liberates others. Whatever. Her heart is open and for the first time, for as long as she can remember, she feels ready for anything.
A silence filled with sound. Cynthia sits at its centre and all about, in every direction, the conversations of the birds enliven the warm, still air. A symphony, though this word is too bland to make sense of what she hears.

The *faark faark* of a crow demands attention. The wing action of the bird is audible as it flies away. She’s heard somewhere about this, that moving through the territory of other birds, they intentionally intensify their wing beat to let everyone know that they’re just passing through. Yamatji do that, holler out to warn the spirit of the place when someone is passing through.

She loves the company of birds. To be a bird, high up in the canopy of the trees, chirruping and chattering through the long hours of the days, through the dry months and the coming of the rain, all the seasons in their turn. Light-hearted, undaunted. Gliding in the currents unhindered. Flying.

The sweet breeze touches her skin, unsettles the pale hair on her forearms like the wind moving through dry grass. Cynthia unfolds her limbs, grasps the stem of the sapling and pulls herself to her feet. The walk she takes back through the timber is slow and deliberate. Every moment precious.

She pauses at the crest of the ridge and looks out to the blue haze of the distant ranges. A mighty sea of mulga, acacia and a few stately eucalypts fills the floor of the valley. Their slender white limbs dance a tango with the wind and they throw back their heads. A fine tan and white hawk wheels high in the air, watching and waiting.

She’s not to blame. Not really. She knows this. With so much to be done around the place and the bank pressing in, what else could she do? But all the same, she’ll never forgive herself.

She thinks of when she first arrived. Hearing the bird calls for the first time, learning the tracks of the wallabies and echidnas, the goannas, even the snakes, that passed near the homestead. When she’d first come, there was a huge mound up behind the shed, painstakingly built by a pair of mallee fowl who nested there for years. Foxes, cats, humans had put a stop to that. She’d nursed young wallabies, numerous birds, even a bandicoot, any orphans or strays in times of need. Though Alec didn’t encourage it, he was just as pleased when a young animal was healed and released back into the bush.

People think that year after year of relentless burning sun has done this to them; toughened people like them and made them hard-hearted. But that’s too easy. If they’d not had to meet the payments, it could’ve been different. They’d got rid of the cattle when the bottom fell out of the market. And because she really believed the land could be brought back. For what? To make way for
trucks of ore; uranium no less. Not that she knew that when she had signed the contracts for the road. They didn’t agree on much but she’s sure Alec would be appalled. She’s sorry for that. Who would have thought it; a road right through the middle of the station, from uranium mines to their beloved coast? It is something neither of them ever considered. It’s the one thing he was consistent about, apart from his grog. He was ferocious when it came to anything to do with war.

‘And what do you think about the rest of it?’ she says, as if he is standing there beside her. ‘I bet that gave you a jolt, me handing over the lease of what’s left of Canterbury to Dolly’s mob? All those years it was in the family. It is unsettling.’ He doesn’t answer of course, how could he? To think, married all those years, and yet how little she knew him. She’s glad she doesn’t have to have it out with him. She can do as she pleases.

Jazz walks just like her, too old to race ahead. She can tell by the heaving of his breath that it’s too much for him. ‘Sorry old boy, I just wanted one last morning here. You too, if you could only realize.’

The dozer is there, waiting by the gate. ‘An early start,’ Rex Myers had said when he’d called in at the homestead to make the arrangements. ‘It’ll be a stinker, tomorrow.’ And he’d laughed.
When The River Runs Dry

She can’t think of anyone with whom she has less in common. He wears his shirts open wide at the neck revealing a thick matt of curling, ginger hair, his favourite food is chicken and chips, he sings along with Britney Spears. And he thinks climate-change is a myth. But go to bed they did. And in so many ways she’s been paying for it ever since. What love is; that is the question. Their tenth wedding anniversary has brought her no closer to the answer.

‘Pippa? Wakey, wakey.’ She reaches for the iron, lines up. Her stroke is wild and she barely makes out the trajectory, only that the ball is now submerged in dry grass. This stupid game. It’s another of the things she does in this town. It’s expected. When the kids are all at school and your husband brings in enough so you don’t need to go out to work. Since Caly’s come back, she can’t help it, everything calculated through Caly’s cold-as-glass eyes. Not fair, she knows, but it’s hard seeing her life refracted under the wunderkind’s critical gaze. This morning she’d started bleeding. Her womb aches from the sharp striated pain. She swallows a couple of Panadol, her mind on Caly with her unmarked body, a childless woman. And then she’s remembering them, those summer days, when they were still kids.

Last night, swimming in the moonlight, dancing in song. Like a hippy, some new-age loopy. But it has touched her, that openness between them that she had almost forgotten. Cynthia, shimmering in the silver light, a farewell of some kind, Pippa sees that now. She won’t live forever, only in their memories.

They’ve reached the ninth hole. ‘That’ll do me today,’ she says after she sinks the ball.

‘Lazybones,’ the other women tease, for they are all trim and taut and wouldn’t consider a day without their strict regimes of jogging, aerobics and Pilates, a set or two of tennis.

In the house she should be thinking of what to give the family for dinner. Instead she pours what’s left of last night’s chardonnay into a glass and heads into the living room, pulls from the shelves a stack of photo albums she had assiduously collated when she was younger. When her life was worth photographing, she thinks, delicious moments of risk and promise. There’s the delight of the first born, her every milestone captured on film. She flicks through the many albums of Sophie, the one or two of Isobel. But it’s not the children she sees, it’s her and Geoff she’s looking for. She stares into the faces. They seem happy enough. Don’t they?
Their wedding album, and pictures of them when they were kids. Yes kids. With Stephen and Nick. And Caly. One she remembers her mother took, at her sixteenth birthday. The last summer. It was her party but it’s Caly they’re looking at. She remembers, though, that night Nick had tried to kiss her. She’d laughed in his face. It’s clear to her now, remembering, who she had wanted to kiss. But by the time it was dark enough for such longings, Caly had disappeared. That last summer. When Stephen and Caly got together. It spoiled everything. She never came back, her hoity toity mother saw to that.

‘Mum! Mum!’ That time already. Like she’s been caught in the act, she pokes the early albums back into the shelf.

‘Don’t yell. I’m in here.’
‘What’re you doing?’ Isobel asks.
‘Oh, just some sorting out.’

‘Wow! Is that you?’ Isobel holds a photograph of the four of them. She’s wearing her first bikini, it’s red and yellow. Caly is in racing bathers. Stephen and Nick stand either side of them, an arm around each, and their surfboards.

‘You look happy, Mum.’
‘It was summer holidays,’ Pippa says.
‘Not like now. It’s like, boring,’ Sophia says, snatching the photograph from her little sister.
‘It was for us too,’ Pippa says. ‘Enjoy it while you can, having nothing to do.’
‘Sure,’ Sophia says. And then, as if suddenly remembering, ‘Why do we have to live here? In this boring town. In the middle of nowhere? It’s not fair.’

‘You’ve got to make your own fun. We did.’

‘Yeah, but you were lucky. Your friends were so cool.’ Pippa takes the photograph from her daughter and looks at them there, with the rolling sea behind them, the summer sun catching their eyes.

‘You’re right, we were,’ she says. ‘Now, look at this little “telly-tubby”.’ Isobel squirms onto her mother’s lap, the album spread open before them. The photographs of Sophia holding her sister for the first time, of all of the firsts of their lives, keeps the girls talking for most of the afternoon.
A Fine Line

She longs for him to fill her, to lie with his cock in her all through the night. Why him? Why? Why couldn’t it be anyone but Vin Satler? Through the open window, the sea smashes into the cliffs below the homestead. Far across the sea, it is daytime— _where is he? Who is he with?_ Long after the first haunting cry of the mopoke, her eyes close. She sleeps until, through the open window, the sun spreads like honey across the walls. Caly wakes in her mother’s old bedroom invigorated, and excited. With an expert touch, she brings herself release in a quick orgasm.

After breakfast, she and Cynthia pull the books from the shelves in the study.

‘I’ve wanted to do this for so long,’ her aunt says. ‘Be ruthless. Make a pile here for yourself or for friends, but most of them can go to Vinnies.’

That name. _What is he doing? Who is he fucking? It’s over. No more going back to him._ But still the longing, the desire for him catches in her, sharp and intense. At the back of her mind, even as she tosses Jeffery Archer and Wilbur Smith onto a mounting pile of books, puts aside _To the Lighthouse, Madame Bovary_ and a copy of _Dirt Music_ dedicated to Cynthia on the other, her mind is plotting how to get laid. Fuck anyone, sleep with no-one. Not that she could say that it had worked for her, she’s had so many failures. Vin, of course. And three weeks sailing with Nick Stepaneki around southern Turkey and the Mediterranean after filming _Calypso_ broke her rules, too. But in the end, she didn’t give in. She’d dropped Nick at the airport and cut contact for years, so that he was under no illusions. So many men and some whose name she cannot even recall. _Love ’em and leave ’em…_ before they do the same to you. Is that the one thing she’s learned from her mother? And how to keep secrets.

She and Cynthia work at it all day. Despite her policy to travel light, Caly can’t help but keep back dozens of the books.

‘There’s some gems here. Have you read them all?’

‘Most of them,’ Cynthia says. ‘There’s nothing better than getting stuck into a good book. I’ve always hated television.’ The twelve boxes on the veranda are ready to be taken to the op-shop.

‘I’ll drop them off— get them out of the way.’ Caly begins lifting the boxes, loading them into the back of the ute. Gribble’s book sits on the table, an accusing finger. ‘You know I’m going out to the mine on Friday? I’m going to pop over and see Nick, see what I need to bring. Return his book.’ There is no-one else she can go to.

‘There’s strong wind and a lot of rain forecast later in the week,’ Cynthia says.

‘Really? No sign of it now. Is there anything you want from town?’
She showers quickly and dresses carefully. A two-piece swimsuit under the flowing shirt and a long wrap skirt of rainbow colours that she bought last spring in Spain; a mad extravagance and of course she’d never worn it. In New York, she conforms to black and white, and all the shades of grey in between.

Even though Cynthia is now resting in her room and Uncle Alec is no longer here to supervise her, Caly slips away quietly, like she did in the old days, her heart racing, stupidly, with the fear of being caught. She drives with the windows down and the cool breeze blowing in her hair. The town is busy. There must be a big meeting, though she hasn’t heard. Then she remembers the boy, found hanging last weekend. The funeral?

She drops the books off at Vinnies quickly, feeling like an intruder among what she sees now are the mourners, and drives to the tavern car park. She’ll leave the ute, walk out to Nick’s place from here. She’s never been to Nick’s place, but she knows the general direction and the track is well defined.

Two large canvas tents, army style, sit on the northern edge of the clearing. There’s a fire pit, an old table and a couple of chairs. She calls his name, coo-ees several times, but there’s no reply. Wattlebirds hidden up in the foliage of the coastal mallees give a high-pitched screech when she moves toward the tent. A pair of willy-waggails twitter and hop excitedly along the rim of the large water tank. She feels like Goldilocks. He’s not here.

In the evening light, his place settles comfortably, even beautifully into the environment. She can see that it’s a pleasant place to live. She turns and looks south, sees the town nestled into the folds of the bay. Further south, the port structure is clearly visible, towering like some massive beast over both sea and land.

The flaps of the tents are secured and, although tempted to see more of how he lives, she contents herself with exploring the clearing. She takes an enamel cup and fills it from the water tank, sits a while at the table to drink. He must be at the funeral. She can’t make out if she’s pleased or sorry he isn’t here. While the need for sex hasn’t left her, something in her is happy that it isn’t Nick she’ll use tonight. She walks back to town. Perhaps he’s gone to the tavern.

He’s not there. Very soon, she’s approached by a man with lean lines, elegant features and a German accent. His name is Ulrich. His leans into her as they talk about travelling, about being here in the north-west, their legs touching beneath the table. Soon they’re joined by an older man, who introduces himself as Max. They order beer, then switch to tequila.

‘I can’t work out who you remind me of,’ Max says. ‘Joni Mitchell? Emmy Lou Harris?’

‘That dates you,’ Caly says.

‘You can sing, though.’
‘What makes you say that?’

‘Oh, something a little bird told me.’ He takes hold of her hand, strokes the soft inner skin of her wrist. Caly calls Cynthia to tell her she won’t be home till later and the three of them go to Max’s room. Later they share a spliff. They slip out to the hotel pool, drink bourbon from the bottle and swim and play in the streaks of silvery moonlight that drift on the water. She tells herself that it’s fun.
Frankie leaves the house and walks swiftly along the street toward the jetty where Nick’s waiting. It surprises her still. She and Nick back together again. Together, whatever that means. She smells the ocean, hears the waves crash on the sand, the stirrings of the wind in the tamarisk trees that border the beach. But she can see nothing, no moon, no light except the pink glow from the Coca Cola sign that never goes off. Everybody tucked up for the night in their neat little boxes. A long way off, a dog barks.

This is the time of the year she most loves to be here. The nights warm and balmy. Soft fingers of air move over the bare skin of her arms and legs. Nick comes out of the darkness and they walk together down to the water’s edge, guided through the inky shadows by the crash of the waves on the sand. The moon and the stars remain hidden by the heavy clouds that fill the sky. They fall into each other without ceremony. Like animals. He smells of the sea. They drink wine from tin mugs. He lights a spliff and passes it to her.

‘What’s she going to do?’ Frankie asks.

‘I haven’t spoken to her,’ Nick says. He knows she doesn’t believe him. ‘Not since I dropped her at the homestead. I couldn’t leave her out there.’

‘You and her, I get it, you know.’ Frankie inhales, releases a puff of the fragrant smoke.

‘I doubt it. I never have. When I saw those photos, seeing her again this time, I don’t know… I mean I can see it really was nothing. I was young. It was a crush. We all had a crush on her.’

‘Doesn’t matter anyway, Nick. We weren’t born yesterday, you and I, we’ve been around. But that snake, Satler. Is she really that thick?’

‘She has no idea. About what happened to you, I mean. It’s no excuse, but…’ Nick says.

‘It was a fucking shock. To think that she had… But to be honest I’m more pissed off about her blundering into the campaign. How are we going to get that sorted? It’s what they want, of course, get us all jumping up and down about who is fucking who instead of the real issue; the shitloads of plutonium and toxic waste they’re about to dump on our doorstep.’

‘Déjà vu. Like Gribble. Run her out of town and anything we say will be discredited.’

‘Yeah, well, some things never change. I’ve been reading that stuff you gave me about Bernier Island. Lock-up hospitals, what a joke, prisons more like. Chaining them up, marching them out to those islands for what, treatment? Not bloody likely. Guinea pigs to trial their toxic therapies, and then to die like dogs away from their country. They didn’t even have syphilis,’ Frankie cries. Nick strokes her arms, comforting. ‘They could have been cured of yaws.’
‘Better pull your finger out, Frankie. Write those stories down. You’ve been talking about it long enough. You’re the right one to do it. Those stories of what happened around here in the past, they should be told.’

‘That’s what Mum says. But I still can’t get my head around it. It happened here, so close, my own people, those islands just a few kilometres from the shore.’

‘Daisy Bates said she’d never seen worse treatment of any human beings.’

‘Writing’s not going stop this mob though, is it?’

‘Probably not,’ Nick laughs lightly. “‘Come on, huddle up guys. Frances Watson is going to read you a story. Listen well. This happened. Right here, in this place.’ I’m sure you’ll have those hard-hearted bastards weeping in their hankies in no time.’

‘Oh shut up.’ She draws the last bit from the spliff and buries the butt under a handful of sand. ‘If only she hadn’t stuck her nose in.’

‘Oh, come on Frankie. Satler’s stitched her up like he does everybody. You’ve seen the films– she knows what she’s doing. She must have got on to something. Are you still coming tomorrow night?’

‘Do you think it’ll still be happening?’

‘She’s used to flak, but you’re right. I can’t say I’d blame her, if she pulls out. She may not be able to face it.’

‘It won’t be up to her. I doubt whether the Council will have anything to do with her after this.’ What to remember and what to forget. Funny, how it all boils down to that. Especially for us mob trying to survive in this world. After a while she says, ‘I’ve never seen Calypso, only the one about the whales.’

‘Ocean Blues. And?’

‘It’s good. See, I’ve said it. You happy now?’

‘Apparently they’ve axed the one she was making about the spill in the Gulf of Mexico,’ Nick says. ‘Isn’t it obvious, she’s being gagged?’

‘Okay, okay, but where does that leave us?’

‘Why ask me? You’re the ones that’ll have to sort it.’ Nick brushes at the sand that clings to her feet, moves his hands up along her legs. ‘It’s not like I ever did any good. What did I get out of them: a couple of art exhibitions, a few lousy training programs? Anyway, what’s your mother saying? And Cyril?’

‘Mum thinks like you, give the girl a go, and what Cyril says would make you blush. Then again maybe not, knowing the sort of thing you like to get up to.’ Frankie stretches up, nibbles and sucks on his ear. ‘I’m glad… you know, that we,’ she whispers. ‘Cyril calls you my toy-boy.’
‘That’s okay; you can play with me anytime, old girl. What’d Donny and Vic call me?’
‘You don’t want to know.’
‘Shh,’ Nick says, pulling her close.
Lake Winifred

‘How come you’re allowed in?’ Caly asks as Nick steers the vehicle across the steel stock grid.

‘Andrea’s nephew is the heritage officer for the company. I said we were out this way and that I’d drop in some of my anthropology books. They’re no use to me these days.’

‘Do you miss it, Nick?’

‘At first I missed the pay packet, but I’ve got used to living without a lot. No regrets about leaving the job though, the whole thing’s a bloody sham.’

‘You must have been right in the thick of it. Some wanting development, others wanting their lands intact— as much as land can be these days. I’ve seen it in every Indigenous community I’ve been, all over the world. It’s so difficult, isn’t it?’

‘I certainly don’t have any answers. We’re all expected to sell ourselves.’

They’ve driven through flat, sparsely vegetated country that once operated as a sheep station.

‘There’s nothing here,’ Caly says. ‘Where is this godforsaken mine?’

‘Actually, you’re looking at it. The ore body is very close to the surface here. Uranium oxide’s formed from the white rock, with that yellow mineralisation.’ Nick slows the car to avoid a kangaroo carcass on which wedge-tail eagles are feeding. The massive birds have poor hearing and don’t hear the vehicle’s approach until it’s upon them. With great effort they extend their wings and lift their full bellies into the air. In the rear-vision mirror, Caly watches them return to the carcass, even before the dust of the road has settled. ‘The mining is the easy bit. It’s the processing that causes the biggest problems. But, hey, you probably know a lot more than me about that stuff.’

‘Theoretically maybe, but I’ve never been involved with mines. The ocean’s been my baby, oil and gas. It’s so dry here. I’m surprised there’s enough water to operate a mine. Desalination?’

‘You’re joking. Why pay to make it when you’ve got open slather on some of the best water in Australia? To them it’s a bottomless underground basin. As we drive in, see, over there, that’s the pond where they dump the water that’s been used. It’s highly contaminated of course. Across the industry, they still haven’t sorted water management. The Ranger Mine in the Northern Territory is a good example. What to do when tailings are impacted by an inundation of torrential rain? It’s costing companies a fortune trying to manage it, god knows how much in so-called rehabilitation costs for taxpayers. Mega-litres of fresh water wasted. After the ore is ground and leached with sulphuric acid, they use things like kerosene, ammonium sulfate, then chuck it in the furnace to convert it to the uranium oxide. The waste has to go somewhere.’ Nick stops the car. ‘The office,’ he laughs, seeing
her surprise at the makeshift shed.

‘Bloody hot, eh?’ The man who emerges is overweight and sweating profusely. ‘But by the look of those clouds… how’s about twenty bucks on a real downpour by mid afternoon.’ He checks the permit on the computer and points directions to the mine site. They hear him call up to the site on the radio, announcing their arrival. The scale of the pit astonishes her; she’s seen few mines and never before an open cut mine ranging over hectares of earth. The exposed purple and red earth is a gaping wound scarring the otherwise flat landscape.

Andrea’s nephew Todd greets them as they climb out of the car.

‘Great to see you again, Nick,’ he says. ‘I was about ten the last time.’

‘Yes, I wondered if I would recognise you.’

‘And?’

‘Oh, apart from the fifty centimetres and the fifty kilograms you’ve gained, and the face fuzz, you haven’t changed a bit. This is Caly, Caly Bell.’ Todd reminds her of a big brown bear. When he greets her, his handshake is powerful.

‘Great to meet you. Really great to meet you. But perhaps, I’ve been thinking, best not say your name, I mean, people here don’t need to know who you are.’

Caly pulls a face, and says, ‘I’m not here incognito. My name’s on the permit. Isn’t it, Nick?’ Before Nick can answer, Todd says, ‘I love your work, it’s not that. But some people won’t be pleased to see you here. I thought it’d be better, not to make a fuss. Actually, I put you down with Nick, under Andrea’s name. I hope that’s okay?’

‘No, not really,’ Caly says, annoyed.

‘Would’ve been better to say, Todd,’ Nick says. ‘But it’s done now. And we do want to see around this place, don’t we Caly?’

‘Okay,’ she says, looking away from them. ‘So let’s get on with it, and then get the hell out of here.’

‘Where’re those books, Nick? Let’s get them inside, and grab something for lunch before I show you around.’

‘Lunch! No, let’s just get on with it,’ Caly says. It’s stifling out of the airconditioned vehicle. Swollen banks of cloud seal the sky and there’s not a breath of wind. She’s dressed badly; her light shirt clings with sweat, her jeans are too hot and constricting.

‘Sorry Caly, but I’m ravenous. I have to eat something,’ Nick says. They follow Todd to the dining room. When Caly indicates that she doesn’t want any of the many meat dishes, the woman behind the counter doles out a huge helping of the roast vegetables, potato and green salads.

Workers in fluorescent orange shirts sit at the tables talking and eating. Todd avoids
introducing them as they make their way along the serving counter and back to a table by the wide window. She looks over land that shows no evidence of mining; like the country they drove through this morning; flat, scarcely vegetated and dry. But although it’s not long after midday, the light is dim and moody, the sky now filled with bulging black cloud.

‘The guy at the gate might be right. It looks like a huge storm’s brewing,’ she says to Nick, who turns to look out the window. ‘What’ll we do?’

‘Let’s eat, then we’ll see,’ he says. His voice reassures; he’s a kind man, Nick. A momentary flare of panic registers in her gut– was it only yesterday evening when she walked out to his camp? Thank god he wasn’t there. Memories of the night before explode in her mind, and completely against her will, stir desire. Her pills are in her backpack. She excuses herself, picks up the pack and heads to the bathroom. In the mirror she stares into eyes that belong to no-one. The pills slide down easily. She dabs water on her face, wipes with wet paper the sweat from under her arms and in the folds of her throat. In the dining room, she sees that the two men have waited for her before they begin. The food’s good and after the long drive, Caly surprises herself and eats everything on her plate. The meal calms her a little. She’s been on edge ever since they arrived.

‘How are you enjoying the job?’ Nick asks. ‘It’s not always easy working with people you don’t necessarily agree with.’

‘It pays the mortgage,’ Todd says. ‘I took it with no illusions. We’ve got a baby now, a little girl.’

‘I hadn’t heard,’ Nick says. ‘I don’t see much of Andrea, now she’s with what’s-his-name.’ Nick pushes his plate away, leans back in his chair and looks directly at Todd. ‘You know south of here is the Yeelirrie mine? Named after the sheep station, but in local language it means “place of death”. No wonder they’ve settled for an English name here. Much less revealing.’

Todd doesn’t reply, but his face says it all and he puts his hands palms-up, like stop signs.

‘I take it the Aboriginal custodians are happy with this?’ Caly asks.

‘You think they shouldn’t be, that they don’t understand the economic benefits? Perhaps you think they should be roaming around their country hunting and gathering and singing ceremonies,’ Todd says, the pitch of his voice rising.

‘That’s not what I meant. Just wondering if they’ve been part of any decisions, whatever’s happening here on their land. It’s been my experience that the Indigenous people often don’t get a say.’

‘Well, not here. They’re a great mob. Not all of them agree, there’s some who don’t want it, but yes, most of them are behind it.’

‘Or they were when they signed up for it. I guess it remains to be seen how they feel when
they see that nothing’s really changed,’ Nick says.

‘Oh, I don’t think that’s fair. It’s already changed. There’s eleven in the training programme and quite a few of them have jobs here and in town already. And there’s the royalties.’

‘And what exactly does a heritage officer paid by a mining corporation do?’ Caly says.

‘Caly Bell. Well, well, I kind of expected you’d make it out here sometime, but not quite this soon.’ Max stands behind Todd, who jumps up from his chair.

‘You know each other?’ he asks.

‘Not well,’ Max says, smiling. ‘We bumped into each other last night at the tavern. We have a mutual friend in Geoff Harvey. And you, Nick.’

‘I wouldn’t have thought “mutual” or “friend” in my case, Max,’ Nick says sharply, looking across at Caly.

Out of the window, Caly sees that it’s started raining. Her face, she knows, must betray her shock, her dismay. Not once had it occurred to her that Ulrich and Max weren’t travellers just passing through. She watches the rain pelting down. The racket above them on the iron roof reminds her of storms at the homestead. She’s tired, so tired. Her mind twists and turns, but she sees nothing that might alleviate this situation.

‘What do you think of our little outfit here?’ Max asks.

‘They haven’t had a chance to look around yet,’ Todd says quickly. ‘They just got here before lunch.’

‘You won’t see much now that this has hit. You know you won’t be getting out tonight, you know that?’ He laughs out loud at Caly’s horrified expression. ‘Oh, don’t worry. The accommodation isn’t all that bad. Todd’ll organise you rooms, or are you together?’

‘No,’ Caly says too stridently, ‘No, we’ll need a room each. Thankyou.’ She turns to Nick.

‘Do we really have to stay? If we leave straightaway, we’d get through?’

Max says, ‘I’m afraid not. Mississippi Creek’s already up. We’ve just had a call from someone who’s stuck on the other side. Trust me. I wouldn’t lie... keep you here under false pretences. Delightful as the prospect is.’

‘Nick? Can’t we go?’

But Nick says, ‘Come on. Show us where we’re sleeping.’ He nods to Max and walks after Todd. Caly leaps up and moves to follow, but Max catches her arm.

‘I didn’t notice you on the permit lists for today,’ he says. ‘Any reason why you didn’t want us to know you were here?’

‘That wasn’t my doing. Max, last night, it has nothing to do with this. Right? Consenting adults, and all that?’
‘Of course, my lovely. Good to hear you’re not with that dickhead. Nick Stepaneki wouldn’t know if his arse was on fire. He’s waiting for you, by the way.’

Caly pulls herself from his grasp and moves toward the door. ‘I look forward to bumping into you later,’ he calls after her.

‘What was that all about?’ Nick says as they follow Todd to the accommodation block. Outside, rain pelts onto the iron roof of the walkway that connects the two main buildings and forms an opaque curtain, like waterfalls, either side. Caly slips her hand into the torrent, pulls the water up with her palm to drink.

‘Don’t drink it,’ Todd says abruptly. ‘It’s not filtered.’

‘That bad, eh?’ Nick says. ‘Even the rain’s contaminated.’ They all speak with their voices raised, projecting into the racket of the rain on the metal roof, adding to the tension.

‘I don’t mean that. Just, well the drinking water we use is filtered. OHS rules. Actually, we bring it in, bottled, the drinking water.’

‘Of course,’ Caly says. ‘Someone has to make something on it, or what’s the point? Water’s become a very profitable commodity. What do the community do for water? Surely they don’t have to buy it in bottles?’

‘There’s a soak near the township. The water gets pumped up to the tank.’

‘I thought I heard that the table’s rising, that the water’s getting to be undrinkable?’ Nick says.

‘We’ve just put in a filter— because of the sediments, salts, that kind of thing. The community are very happy with it. The water’s fine. Here we are.’ He unlocks a door, then moves to the next, unlocks it and pushes it open. The rooms are neat. In the compact space there’s a bed, a dresser for clothes, a table and chair. ‘The bathroom’s at the end of the covered way,’ Todd says, looking at them both. ‘Can’t show you much, until the rain stops. What do you feel like doing now?’

Caly takes her bag from him, and, her tone curt, says, ‘I’ll take this one? I need to rest, take a shower.’

‘I’d no idea you guys knew Max Farrant or I’d never’ve …’ Todd says. Caly doesn’t reply. She nods at Todd, gives Nick a quick glance and closes the door behind her. She throws back the cover, falls onto the bed and cries herself into an exhausted sleep. She wakes in a darkened room, the hammering of the rain again startling in its intensity. Strong wind batters the walls of the prefabricated building and when she stands, she feels the room rock in its force. For the first time, she realises the extent of the storm. Cynthia mentioned rain, but no-one seemed to be expecting this. Is it a cyclone?

Even in these thoughts, her shame lingers about the previous night. She swallows another
pill. She must shower, at least, and change into fresh clothes. Against the wind, she manages to push open the door, is half blown down to the bathroom block. She stands under the shower’s stream, tears mingling with the water. She’s in her room only a few moments when there’s a knock, and Nick’s there.

‘Jesus, what a mess,’ he says. He moves into the room. ‘You look terrible. Are you okay?’
‘Tired,’ she says. ‘Embarrassed. And this storm.’

‘I’m sorry about Todd. What an idiot to not say who you were.’ He sits down at the small table. She pushes the door shut and the noise of the storm quiets again. ‘I hadn’t realised you knew Max Farrant?’ he says.

Caly stays where she is, standing by the closed door. ‘I don’t,’ she says too sharply. ‘I met him at the tavern. That’s all.’

‘With good old Geoff. You know, Farrant’s one of the reasons I got out of the anthropology business. When I was working with the university, he was involved in getting Yeelirrie up and running. There’s virtually nothing he won’t do, to get what he needs. He’s a total bastard through and through. Stupid of me, not to check with Todd first. I had no idea he’d be out here, sticking his nose in. He’s normally down with the big boys, doing their dirty work. Stephen’s had a few run-ins with him. Farrant does a lot of work with Vin Satler. Do I need to say more?’

Caly moves across the room and sinks down on the bed.

‘What about this?’ She waves her arms at the thumping roof, the window where the rain and wind continue to strike.

‘What do you want to do, make a run for it?’ he laughs. ‘Actually, that’s why I knocked on your door. I’m meant to be taking you along to the main hall. But I wanted to have a word with you before we go back there. Bring your bag, you might need it later. It could be a long night. At least we’ll be locked down in the bar.’

Someone pounds on the door, and between them they push it open. They run madly behind the man who’s been sent to collect them, along the open walkway, the rain and wind slicing their legs, the noise deafening. Inside is relative calm, although once she’s adjusted to the new surroundings, Caly’s hit by a different din. The entire mine population’s eating, drinking, playing pool in what now seems a very confined space.

‘We’re operating on the camp generator,’ Todd says, passing her a beer. ‘No television, but there’s reports coming in by radio.’

‘A cyclone,’ she asks, ‘and you didn’t know it was coming?’

‘When it first formed, they thought it would go a lot further inland, east of here. And travel much more slowly. This’s very unusual. Usually they start out at sea, but this one seems to have
come from nowhere. It’s behaving more like a tornado. Strange.’

Caly says nothing. Nick leans into her and says quietly, ‘Wise girl. Not a good time or place to get on your soapbox.’

‘I keep thinking about Cynthia. I hope she’s not worrying. I just want to get through tonight and get out of here.’

‘That’s not likely, Caly.’

‘What on earth do you mean?’

Nick laughs again. ‘Don’t look so worried. I just mean that getting away tomorrow may be optimistic. Right now this camp’s nothing more than an island – we’re no different to the wildlife, or the sheep and cattle, stranded in a big ocean of floods. There’s no way we’ll drive out of here anytime soon. I’m hoping the wind and rain have cleared by morning so at least I can get outside and take photographs.’

‘I’ve heard about your wild ways, Caly Bell, but this is well beyond my expectations.’ It’s Max Farrant. ‘How about a game of snooker?’ When she ignores him, he raises his voice and says, ‘Or perhaps you prefer pool games of a different kind?’

She turns and walks to the pool table.

‘Best of three and…’

Caly cuts in and finishes his sentence. ‘You’ll get the hell out of my face.’

Farrant moves the couple in the middle of a game from the table. He sets up the balls. Nick has come to stand beside her; it’ll make winning harder for her, Nick watching.

She sinks three balls in quick succession and Farrant comments loudly on her prowess. For a woman, she’s pretty good. He deliberates on each shot, brushes past her to line up the ball. When he fails to sink the black she wins the first game. While he sets up the table he yells for drinks, hands her a double bourbon that she knows she downs too fast. He wins the next game, not easily, but there’s a shift in her concentration that he’s able to use. It seems everybody has moved to the table for the final round. She’s tired, but angry enough to make him pay. Snooker’s the only thing she and Alec had in common. Sometimes, on long days with nothing to do– too windy for the beach, too hot or too cold for doing anything but hanging around in the house, Alec would nod toward the billiard room and in that dark place that smelled of dust and old polish, they’d play. At first, she remembers, he was kind, allowing her to win sometimes, giving her tips to help her bring him down. But as she got better, he gave no favours, and they played one against the other, as if she was one of the men. There’s no doubt she learned a lot. And most especially, Alec being who he was, she’d learned tactics that would make it possible for her to sink Max Farrant today. She had the skills, the game plan; she just needed to want it enough.
‘You can do this,’ Nick whispers, recollecting the few times he’d tried to beat her.

She and Farrant both begin slowly this time. Caly paces her shots with his, deliberating on which ball to take, painstakingly calculating each angle, assiduously positioning her body.

‘Get a move on, love,’ a woman shouts. ‘We haven’t got all night.’

‘I thought that’s what we did have,’ Caly replies and strikes, the yellow ball hitting the sock with a thwack. There’s a round of applause. On the table she has the red and the black; Farrant the black and three coloured. ‘What happens to the tailing ponds in weather like this?’ she shouts as he lines up the green ball. He eyeballs her, then looks again along the cue at the angle of the shot. ‘Scary, what the regulators might find with all this water sloshing about.’

And then the lights cut out, and in the darkness there’s only the clatter of the rain on the roof, the roar of the wind, and the shouts of all of them trapped together in the storm.
Shadow Lines

In torchlight, the safety officer organizes them for sleeping, as best they can on the mats and bedding brought into the recreation hall. Caly and Nick curl side by side. She hears his faint snore, feels his breath on her neck. She rolls over onto her back and stares into the darkness. The noise of the storm seems to be lessening, but still she cannot sleep. The air is exceedingly hot and dank with no air-conditioning, the windows tightly sealed against the outside elements. The only light is the glow of a couple of torches that have been left on. Switching on her own torch, Caly picks her way across the hall toward the bathroom. It’s deadly quiet inside the tiled area. She checks her cell phone, but of course it’s not receiving. She runs water onto her upturned wrists, through her fingers, splashes it once more in handfuls onto her face and hair until, in the mirror, she looks like some wild creature emerging from the depths of Atlantis. Or a bunyip that’s come up through a billabong or spring. A tune from childhood, about the creatures of the Australian bush comes into her mind– it all seems such a long time ago.

‘Not quite up to your mother’s voice, but sweet all the same.’ She starts, hadn’t realised she was singing the words aloud. Farrant moves to stand behind her, pushes her body against the basin cabinet. His hands brush her breasts and pin her arms behind her back.

‘Get off me. No,’ Caly says. ‘No.’

‘Oh, come off it. We all know what you like. I can’t see Ulrich standing up in court telling everybody what an unwilling girl you are.’

Caly struggles, then squats abruptly as she’s practiced in aikido, shoots the force of her body up to pull from his grip. But he doesn’t budge. The torch shines a tunnel of light across the cabinet, eerily illuminating her face and his in the mirror.

‘Let go of me, you fucking bastard,’ she snarls.

‘You’re trespassing, you know that? As if the likes of you is welcome here. And you’re not the only one who’s going to pay. Play your stupid games, you silly little cunt, and just see who wins.’ He releases one arm, brings the hand up and runs it along her cheek, along her shoulder. ‘I spoke with Vin the other day. He knew you wouldn’t be able to keep your nose out of everybody’s business. Do you think anyone really gives a rat’s arse about those films?’

But she doesn’t hear him, not any more, there’s nothing but thoughts of Vin, and what Vin’s told him. She fights again to free herself from his grasp.

‘Max,’ she tries to sound reasonable, ‘it’s been a hell of a day. Think about it– whatever shit comes out about me, I’m tired, beyond tired, and when I rush out of here screaming my tits off about
this, you’ll be up to your neck in it. You can’t get away with this.’

The early morning sun is beginning to light the walls of the bathroom and through the window she hears voices, someone outside checking the surrounds. There’s the sound of people moving about in the building.

‘Let go of me, Farrant. Or I will scream.’

Farrant pinches her breast hard, knees her so that she falls hard to the floor.

‘Keep out of my face, you fucking cunt. I want you on the first chopper and off this site.’
Dark Deeds

The town of Carnarvon sprawls out from the Gascoyne River. The last big flood was some years ago, but the debris from the recent deluge clings to the canopy of trees that overhang the dry riverbed. They drive in through plantations that should be green; although the eye of the storm was hundreds of kilometres east of here, the trees are brown and leafless, stripped to bare bones by the high winds.

‘Mystifying– a river with no water. No wonder the settlers managed everything so badly,’ Caly says. At the gates of the properties are handwritten signs advertising locally grown bananas and mangoes, sweet corn, tomatoes and pawpaw. And no work.

‘There’ll be nothing for months. It’s heartbreaking for the growers, a storm like this. The fruit just forming, everything blown to kingdom come. Carnarvon’s very under-acknowledged,’ Cynthia says. ‘There’re few places in the state that produce as well as they do here. Good water and the soil rich from flooding.’

‘It doesn’t look very prosperous,’ Caly says. ‘And what’s with the palm trees– Miami Downunder?’ Precisely spaced palms line the boulevard that leads into the town centre. Starved for water, their slender stems bent from years of blasting winds, their fronds waving about like the tattered flags of an uncertain welcoming committee.

‘They were still whaling when I came up here,’ Cynthia says. ‘Can you imagine it? I was nineteen– so young.’

‘And so beautiful. I’ve seen the photos. When did they stop?’

‘The mid sixties, I think. They ran out of whales.’

‘If it moves shoot it…’

‘They were opening up the country, what an expression. Like a surgical procedure that leaves a huge scar.’

‘If there’s nothing to chop down or shoot, open a mine.’

They order coffees and toasted sandwiches at Gwoonwardu Mia. The centre houses cultural artefacts and is a meeting place for the Aboriginal language groups that are the custodians of the region. Cynthia knows the woman who brings their order and while they talk, Caly pulls out her phone and keys in the name of the town.

‘Henry Howard Molyneux Herbert, 4th Earl of Carnarvon,’ she says when the waitress goes back to the counter. ‘He never left the green fields of the home country, but has this town on the other side of the globe named in his honour. Under-Secretary of State for the Colonies.’

‘That’s ridiculous,’ Cynthia says. She adds three sachets of sugar, flips the froth from her
coffee onto her spoon and licks it. ‘Hmm, the older I get the more I look forward to my coffee. Dreadful, isn’t it?’

‘Three sugars. You’re lucky you’re not in Brooklyn. The food-nazis are everywhere. Or did you just forget that you’d already sugared it?’

‘I may be getting on, but thank god I’m not demented. That’s the beauty of being old, you can eat what you like.’

‘Sugar, coffee and icecream. I’m sure the doctors will agree with that.’

‘Oh, doctors– what do they know? It’s not as if I want to be around forever, Caly. We’ve all got to go sometime. I wonder what the Aboriginal name for this area is? To be here all this time and I’ve never given it a second thought.’

‘Hmm, interesting segue– you’ve such a talent for changing the subject. But you’re right, we should check it out. Anyway, what about Canterbury? Whose idea was that?’

‘Oh, that was Alec’s family from Kent. But you’re so right. How silly to name the station Canterbury. As if it could mean anything up here.’

‘Did Alec ever talk about going back?’

‘Back? Not really back because he was born here, literally, at the Carnarvon hospital. Anyway, after the war he’d seen enough of the world, he never wanted to go anywhere.’

‘What about you? Did you ever want to go back to Perth? Live somewhere else?’

‘Never. Anyway, where would I have gone?’

‘Oh, don’t give me that crap. Okay, you married him, but you didn’t have to stay.’ Their eyes catch and then Cynthia looks away. ‘I’m so tired of pretending, like everything was normal,’ Caly says, then more gently, ‘Auntie? I’m sorry. It’s just that seeing these displays; the importance of Yamatji extended family, Yamatji stories of where they come from, where they belong... I don’t know the faintest thing about the rest of my family.’

‘I didn’t know you were interested– busy off saving the world,’ Cynthia says without much sympathy.

_How can you say that? All of you refusing to speak about it._ But when Caly finally speaks she’s tender.

‘What about your Grandma Brooks and Pa, where were they from? I know so little about them.’ _And my father? On my birth certificate a big fat blank._ She cannot bring herself to say it.

‘Your cousin Terence has done the family tree,’ Cynthia says, distracted. She’s watching the old married couple at the table alongside. How did they do it– meld like that? ‘If you’re really interested, there’s a book at home somewhere. It doesn’t interest me. It never has. I don’t believe in destiny and all that rot. You have to do the best you can with what life deals you. It doesn’t matter
who you are, no-one else can do that for you. Or save you from yourself. All this rot about where you came from? It’s where you end up that matters.’

‘That’s the problem. I’ve no idea where I’m going to end up because I’ve no idea where I’ve come from. No idea from you, not Grandma and Pa, of course not my mother. No wonder I don’t have a clue where I belong.’

‘Don’t be dramatic, Caly,’ Cynthia snaps, her voice tired. You sound like you mother, she almost adds, but pulls herself back. With so little time left, why waste it arguing with the girl? They sit in silence for some minutes, suddenly aware of the noise of the cafe, and how close they have come to touching emotions that they would both rather leave untouched. The cafe has filled with a large group of tourists: lots of American and Asian accents, an elderly couple not speaking in English who seem to be arguing, and a petite woman speaking with what sounds like a Scandinavian accent, loudly calling her fellow travellers to come and see the didgeridoo she wants very much to buy but is concerned about how to carry. Caly plays with her phone.

‘Oh, listen.’ She reads from the web page. ‘NASA launched 12 sounding rockets here between 1964-65. They went up about one hundred and twenty kilometres.’

‘Oh, that. It was big news when I first came up here.’

‘I’ve never heard anything about it.’

‘They were working on Apollo, and Gemini. Everybody thought it was such a big deal, working with the Yanks. But so what? The same old games. What does it matter, men walking on the moon? Has it made us any better people? What does it mean— to all of us here, now?’ Cynthia rises from the chair. ‘I’m so stiff from sitting in the car. Let’s get a move along. I’d like to freshen up a bit before I go in for the tests.’

The battery for her phone is almost dead. Caly takes a couple of her pills and gulps down a long mouthful of water. She closes her eyes. The hospital waiting room is still crowded, late as it is in the afternoon. A baby cries, two children play tag using their weary parents as a barrier and a drunk woman with a weeping gash on her head is arguing with the receptionist about the long wait. Caly looks again at the screen on her phone. Three more messages. All day they’ve been coming, threatening her, telling her in no uncertain terms that she’s not welcome here.

It’s a shock when the nurse brings Cynthia in a wheel chair. She helps Caly lift her aunt back into the vehicle.

‘What did the doctor say?’ Caly asks hesitantly.
‘Oh, don’t fuss child.’ The old woman is breathing heavily, exhausted.

‘Do you want to stop for a cup of tea on the way out?’

‘Let’s just get home.’

‘Sounds good to me,’ Caly says. Her drugs have relaxed her and she’s feeling fresh, not tired at all. ‘I’ve filled the car, done the shopping, even got us a vegetable tart at the bakery for dinner.’ She arranges a pillow for Cynthia and climbs into the driver’s seat. ‘You sleep. I don’t think I can get into too much trouble getting home.’

‘Don’t forget the turn off. Watch for the white painted tractor tyre. Or we’ll end up in Darwin.’

‘That could be fun. I’ve never been there,’ Caly says, her voice light. When she’d told Dolly that she’s worried, that her aunt seems to have lost her vigour, Dolly had brushed it aside. No good worrying. Anyways, what do you think she did while you and that mother of yours was racing all over the place all those years? Living with that useless, no good man. She’s always had to look out for herself. Done pretty good too, I reckon. Caly hadn’t found talking with Dolly particularly helpful. She reaches across and strokes Cynthia’s hand.

‘Don’t you worry, Auntie, you sleep. How about some Bach for the road.’ Cello Suite no. II–the Prelude much loved by her aunt, settles them both, and before long Cynthia’s wheezing breath is less evident. It’s dusk and the car floats along the sealed road through a tunnel of low, nondescript vegetation. When they eventually turn west, the sun sinking below the horizon, they are quite literally driving toward the light at the end of the tunnel.

There had been a lot of traffic on the main highway, especially haulage trucks. But now that they’ve turned in towards Stark Bay, Caly expects to see little traffic, so she’s surprised when strong headlights move closer and closer behind her. She tilts the rear-vision mirror to avoid the glare. But the vehicle comes closer still, until she’s almost blinded by the light streaming into the cab. She looks quickly behind but can see nothing through the wall of light.

‘You fucking dickhead, what do you think you’re doing? Fuck!’ The car rocks at the impact of the other vehicle. ‘Fuck!’ She grips the steering wheel, steadies the car and accelerates in an attempt to make a break. But the vehicle does not let go and, with several violent thrusts, the car is propelled from the road. She holds firm on the wheel, screaming all the while as they slide and bump through the bush. When the car comes to a standstill, the engine is still whining, the headlights pointing out into the darkness.
Colin “Bog” Marsh is at reception when they walk into the police station.

‘I didn’t realise you were a cop?’ Caly says. Not a good start.

‘Well there you are, you don’t know everything. I know who you are—greenie ratbag,’ Sergeant Marsh says cheerfully. ‘And how are we this morning, Mrs Marsden?’

‘We are well,’ Cynthia says, ‘except for being deliberately run off the road.’ She winces from the effort of speaking; there’s bruising along the left side of her face and a deep cut on the cheekbone. Her arm is in a sling. ‘We’ve come to report an accident.’

‘I see. You look like you’ve been in the wars,’ the sergeant says. ‘Have you broken your arm?’

‘Yes, very observant of you, Colin. They’ll make a detective out of you yet,’ Cynthia says. ‘We could’ve been killed.’

‘When did this happen?’

‘Yesterday evening,’ Caly says. She’d taken most of the impact on her ribs, but the bruising is covered by her clothing. Nothing’s broken, but she has a small dressing above her eye where she hit the windscreen.

‘Where?’

‘On the road between the highway and Stark Bay. Maybe twenty kilometres from the highway.’

‘Witnesses?’ He smiles, flicks through the register on the counter.

‘What do you mean? It was pitch black. We were run off the road.’ Cynthia’s voice wavers. She’s pale and each breath she takes is a short audible burst.

‘Tell me exactly what happened, Mrs Marsden,’ Sergeant Marsh says.

‘She was asleep,’ Caly snaps. ‘I was driving. This bloody big vehicle came up behind me and forced us off the road.’

‘So it’s just you who saw it. I’ll need a description of the vehicle.’

‘You know I can’t, Bog. It was dark. The spotlights made it impossible for me to see a thing.’

‘No tracks?’ He slams the book shut with a loud thud.

‘Let’s go, Auntie.’ Caly puts her arm around her Cynthia’s shoulders. ‘I told you this was a waste of time.’

‘What do you expect? No witnesses.’ He throws his hands in the air. ‘For all we know you were tired, or high as a kite and ran off the road all of your own accord. I could have you for dangerous driving.’ He meets her eyes and grins. ‘Dangerous roads around here; not safe for city-slickers. You haven’t got a clue how things work.’

‘Oh, you’re wrong there, Bog. I know only too well how things work. It’s the same the world
over. What did you get out of it, a carton, a couple of hundred dollars?’ At the door she turns back and hisses. ‘This has been extremely stressful for Cynthia. Keep that in mind when you’re trying to sleep tonight.’
No Way To Say Goodbye

Cynthia’s been collecting the drugs for years and seeing Caly’s stash of pills has just made it easier. She has no idea what her niece swallows so assiduously, but whatever they are, she grinds them into the mix. She’s been through so much, people think she’s a strong woman, but as soon as the “C” word came up she knew she couldn’t face it. Not cancer. Not after Alec. Week by week, day by day, until there wasn’t anything left but the pain. She envies Madeleine, going like that. Ordering a drink, talking sweet about her stunning life to some man in the seat beside her, then nothing. She hopes it was like that. No warning, gone in a flash.

Her affairs are in order. There’s nothing more she can do— even if she did have the wit and the will to keep going, she has nothing left to draw upon. She hadn’t been able to bring herself to tell Caly. Dr Bediako said it himself. It’s not a matter of if but when. And in this she’s determined. She’s arranged a check-up with Bediako; he’ll be here first thing tomorrow morning. And her good friend Dolly will keep the girl at her place until the coast is clear. Not that she’s told any of them what she plans to do.

She feeds Jazz her last meal, gives the injection and cries as the dog falls asleep in her arms. Harry isn’t here, but with Rex Myers, who was looking for another dog. Her letter to Caly sits on the mantel. Her legal and funeral arrangements all settled. She’ll never have to worry for this place again.

She showers and puts on her nightdress. She pours a very large whiskey. With every gulp, she washes down a handful of the mixture.
Borrowed Time

The steel girders slot into each other, offering a series of steps. Caly thinks of Angkor Wat, where the stone steps are at least a metre high. Designed for gods, not mortals. It had been her first trip with Vin. After a few luxurious days in a resort in Thailand, they’d travelled on to Siem Riep. Though she was younger, and she’d thought, fitter, he’d climbed the steps easily, stretching his hand down to help her up. It had amused her then, his chivalry, thinking it just another of the benefits of being with an older lover. A man with old-fashioned manners can make a woman feel cared for, and loved. It stings her, still, that she’s been such a fool.

‘Here,’ Kaz whispers, dropping her hand down to help her up onto the platform. Even in the gloom, Caly sees that the others are already spreading out along the wide strut that connects the storage tanks. She unclips the long rope from her harness, fixes it to the strut, and using the short rope and clasp, fastens herself to the platform. Kaz and Pippa do the same as they take up their positions. But Cynthia’s not here. Silly of them to even think she could come with them. Lately, Cynthia’s hands shake doing the most simple of things. She’s run out of puff. Silly not to take more notice of her symptoms. Cynthia had sewn the seed, though, that night after their swim. Drinking strong Irish coffees in the homestead kitchen, Cynthia’s bright blue eyes had danced.

‘I used to take that hill in a couple of breaths. Not anymore, my dear. This old body, she ain’t what she used to be,’ she’d said.

‘It’s been a long day, of course you must feel tired.’


And then yesterday afternoon, sitting perched on a crate in the shed while Caly had run her eyes and hands over the abseiling ropes, checked the harness, the descender for the second time, she’d said, ‘I’ll be with you in spirit, sweetheart. There’s no way I can climb that thing. I think you know that. This is a job for you young ones.’

‘When this is over, Auntie, we’ll go and see a doctor in Perth,’ she’d said. ‘Surely there’s more that can be done?’

‘Doctors! What do I need with doctors, at my age? I’ve had a good run, my dear. Ah, here’s Nick and Frankie. Be off with you. I want to see nothing less than a front page splash on every paper and television set across Australia, and indeed, the whole wide world.’

It is amazing up here. The air perfectly still. Below, the lights of the town flicker like faraway stars, yet curiously, you feel you could reach up and touch the real stars, they seem so close. Quiet, rather than silent. The rhythmical lap of the waves, the hollow clang of pipes, the continuous creak
of the entire construction, the jangle of their ropes and clasps. It’s as if they’re on a huge ship, floating in the ocean.

Caly hears the women moving across the platform, securing the ties of the banners. They whisper boldly to each other. Thirty-five women, one for each of the nine nuclear states and one for each of the twenty-six countries who support the nuclear war machine. Thirty-five women, moving with care along the struts of the construction, taking up their positions.

It had to be this morning. Hundreds of police are arriving from Perth to bolster security at the port, commencing duty at seven o’clock this morning. Pippa had got this from Geoff, who had got it from Colin Marsh. But even without this, they all know that things are coming to a head.

It is brightening on the eastern horizon, and sunlight spreads, a slow seep of honey across the camber of the sky. Soon there will be enough light for them to act.

‘Thank goodness it’s not cold up here,’ someone whispers.

A mobile phone rings and they hear Kaz’s muffled conversation.

‘The security guards are accounted for,’ she giggles. ‘I’m so glad I didn’t pull the short straw. Shutting them up must have taken some doing.’

‘Shhhhh,’ Pippa says. ‘We’re not done yet.’

Sunlight illuminates the platform. Below, they can make out the others. A line of tripods. Nick and the press photographers beside their cameras. A small group of supporters standing quietly in the shadows. Caly sees Frankie and her cousin Rosie and smiles down at them. They wave. Nick gives the thumbs up.

‘Okay. It’s time. Get your kit off, girls,’ Pippa says.

It’s not the kind of slow and sensuous strip men pay good money to see. In a moment the thirty-five women stand unclothed. Their breasts and thighs are painted with the yellow and black symbols of uranium. On their faces they each wear a skull mask. The large red words on the placards are large enough to be seen from the ground— *Kiss your children goodbye* and *Unsafe: Unnecessary: Uneconomic*. The banners hang from the steel beams like prayer flags moving in the gentle breeze.

Caly begins the slow and deliberate chant that she has learned from Kaz. One by one, the thirty-five women join her until there is nothing to be heard except the song.

‘*Earth am I, Water am I, Air and Fire and Spirit am I, Earth am I, Water am I, Air and Fire and Spirit am I, Earth am I*…’ The women watch, amused as the photographers move back and forth below them like so many toy soldiers. Then the group of supporters are cheering, chanting.

‘Export the government, not uranium. Export the government, not uranium.’ The women on the steel platform chant in unison, their voices resounding across the landscape. ‘Export the government, not uranium. Export the government, not uranium.’ In the distance, they see the
cavalcade of police cars winding toward the town.

‘How long have we got?’ Kaz asks.

‘Not long,’ someone yells from below.

Still singing, Caly undoes the clasp that has held her to the structure, fits the climbing rope and adjusts the descender and the others do the same. When their feet hit the ground they dress again, then work quickly, to retrieve the ropes and pack the gear away in the vans. The photographers continue snapping, even as the vans speed away.

It goes viral, of course. Even before Caly has time to get back to the bus, the images are there. She blocks the calls, the emails on her ipad. Caly wants to speak with her Aunt. But when she gets into the bus, Frankie tells her that Dolly Watson wants to see her. It sounds urgent.
Love Letter

My dearest Caly

I write this while you make your preparations with those wonderful, wild women. It makes me so happy to see you doing this with them. Such a serious matter I know, but knowing that you are having fun, too, does my old heart good. And my old heart needs all the help it can get. The tests were positive, it seems I’ve drawn the short straw— I have a tumour on the heart and they want me to have treatment. To keep me going. A total refit to the heart. But it’s not like an old carburettor and I’m not an old car. Dr Bediako says that without the treatment things will get very difficult. I could go at any time, and I don’t mind that. Why should I, I’ve lived my three score years and ten. But Caly dear, I just cannot bear the idea of leaving here, not being here when I die. Silly, I know. Every living thing that comes into being will cease to be, must reconstitute in some other form. You’re the scientist, you know that more than anyone. I knew when we drove up together, it would be the last time. And I won’t fly, not since Madeleine’s plane went down. I bet that surprises you, you probably didn’t think of me as superstitious, your practical and patient aunt. But I have grown tired of being patient.

There’s to be no blame, beloved Caly. When you cried in my arms about what Vincent Satler has done to you, and we talked about what he did to Frankie, and you saw who he really is, you said you feel like such a fool, such a child. But believe me, this is how it is for all of us. Growing up is the hardest thing we’ll ever do, and sadly, many of us never do grow up. We remain as children; self-centred, fearful, the world around us a source of bewilderment and grief. We blunder about and make mistakes until the day we die. All the while crying like babies. The thing is to learn from your mistakes, if you can. That reminds me of Shirley Hazzard. Funny how I remember what I’ve read over the years— she’s one of those writers that sticks with you long after you put the book down. She says we don’t learn from our mistakes, we just learn to predict them.

It’s a tough old world, filled with old fools like me. But you have what it takes, Caly. I knew that, from the minute I saw you, tiny precious bundle of life, kicking off the blankets in your bassinet, raring to go, your eyes intent and searching. There are no words for how much I love you.

Please, my dear girl, no blame, no regrets. This is a clear and rational decision that I needed to make— just for myself. Could it be that as I’ve become older, I’ve realised how much your mother needed to fly, and how much I need to have my feet on the ground. This red dirt has got under my skin. It has made me who I am.

I’m writing this in the late evening light. Sitting on the western veranda, my favourite spot.
do hope you can read my scrawl. I don’t write letters like I used to, when I first came up here. No-
one seems to these days. That pied butcher bird that’s been hanging around is perched up on the
windmill, singing her perfect version of “Ave Maria”. I’m looking out over the sea, as I have so
many times before. My heart is full of gratitude for this life I’ve lived. Below me the construction
workers are laying down their tools, the building site will be silent until they start over in the
morning. But not until you women have made your mark on that place. The image of you all. Your
song will linger there for as long as people can remember.

The lawyer will talk to you about the arrangements I’ve made. The vet will come for my dear
old friend, Jazz. I have asked that we be cremated together, our remains scattered to the winds on
the beach below the homestead. As Alec’s were.

How much do you know, Caly? It’s enough for me to say that we three, Madeleine, Alec, and
I, we all did love you in our own ways–not always well, but to the best of our ability. On behalf of us
all, I want you to know I am sorry for hurting you. There are questions to which there are no ready
answers, or none that I am able to give.

After this morning’s protest, you’re free to leave this place. Caly, if I ask one thing of you,
it’s this– don’t look back. Sing like there’s no tomorrow. Take this opportunity to be free. This was
never your place. The world needs you. The world out there is your place.

your loving aunt,

Cynthia
1997
Light Upon Water

It first begins in the surf. Her body flung to him in the surge of the wave. The water at Scarborough warmest at the height of summer, the sun dazzling, the sounds of the pounding sea, the swimmers, the smell of it all. Her fear of the sharks out there in the deep blue causing her to forget the sharks that prowl on land. He sinks his teeth into her. Even now she fingers the marks.

Stephen paddles out further, look at me Dad, riding the swell beyond the breakers. They’ve known each other for years and been coming to this beach. They’re here to mark Stephen’s seventeenth birthday. It is one of those rare times her mother has stayed in Perth for the school holidays. She sits upright in a circle of shade, the blue and yellow striped umbrella like an upside down saucer, she a cup cake in red and white polka dots, a large hat falling across attentive eyes.

In the rolling turmoil of the water their bodies collide, bounce off one another, then come together again. Caly splutters mouthfuls of sand and weed. Her hair streams across the plane of his cheek. As if this is the way it must be.

Vin offers his arm, pulls her up to stand beside him, touches her thigh so lightly as they make their way back to their place on the sand. Her mother does not meet her eye but talks on and on until it is time to go. They signal to Stephen, turn to watch as he valiantly rides a wave to the shore. It’s as if Vin barely registers; by the time his son reaches them he’s striding across the sand to the car.

‘You look like a beetroot,’ her mother hisses.

There’s a pattern to it, though this is only evident to her when she looks back to how it all began. Vin has done this before. She knows this as surely as these long summer days will contract to the cold hours of winter. But what can she do? There’s nothing in her experience to tell her what to do. She has no capacity to change it.

Stephen’s leaving for the US. She cries in his arms.

‘I’ll miss you,’ Caly says, which is just another of the lies she’s learned to tell. There’s a cruel relief in knowing that his leaving means one less obstacle to avoid, one less person to want something she cannot give. They’re all there at the airport. Her mother pushes them together, takes a dozen photographs, talks on and on about them all visiting Massachusetts in the break.

‘We’re so proud of you, Stevie,’ her mother says.

The last look as Stephen passes through the departure gate is over quickly. Her mother wants them all to have drinks but Caly’s already planned what to say, how to get away. She hears Stephen’s father making his excuses too, so busy, big proposal on the table, take you all out to dinner soon. She can hardly breathe, can’t look at him. He moves through the gathering of his son’s
well-wishers. His fingertips brush the soft film of her skirt.

At the end of the school year, Vin suggests she come to New York. He has good friends with a daughter her age. It’s all arranged. She knows it’s a bad idea. But what can she say? Even her mother promotes it.

‘New York’s not just a capital city in America,’ she says, ‘it’s the capital city of the world. A year in America will do you good. You’ll be rubbing shoulders with the best of the best. You might even change your mind about that ridiculous course.’

The city is nothing like she expects. But then what could she have expected? When she agrees to stay a while longer, he puts her up in an apartment at Midtown East 47th Street. It’s light and airy and she cannot complain. She feels like she’s living in a movie. The Rockefeller Plaza, Carnegie Hall, the Empire State Building just minutes away. Waiting for him is her occupation, her trade-off. It is not just his touch, his power over her senses; she loves to listen to him, his savoir-vivre. When they walk into the room, everybody wants a piece of him. Caly stands watching on the sidelines, often, for their talk and their tastes are beyond her. She feels so young and foolish in this crowd. But then she gets to walk out with him.

She’s lost among these vocal Americans who seem to know nothing of where she’s come from, and show even less interest in finding out. As if their view of the rest of the world is irrevocably blocked by the tall solid buildings that tower over them.

The closest she gets to a friend is an Hispanic woman named Rita who comes to clean the apartment. On weekends, Rita guides her through perfectly manicured parks by day and grimy bars by night. She becomes adept at making her excuses to leave before copious shots of gin and vermouth heighten Rita’s interest in the company sitting at the bar.

Her favourite activity is wandering the galleries at MoMa. Eventually though, she finds herself standing too long before Les Demoiselles d’Avignon. She can’t take her eyes from the shocking incoherence of their bodies, what she believes the artist has to say about these women, about herself. Each stark angle a slap.

It is only a matter of time. By Christmas it’s almost over.

‘Stephen’s mother and I are meeting him in Switzerland this year. We haven’t had a real skiing holiday since he was a boy. Stephen arrives tomorrow,’ Vin tells her between the crab mousse and the filet mignon. ‘We’re flying out on Thursday.’

‘I know.’ Her voice is sharp over the buzz in the restaurant. ‘Stephen writes. He wants to catch up. I don’t know what to do.’

‘Grow up.’ He says it with a smile. ‘Oh, come on Caly, nobody needs to get hurt. You’re old enough to have a few secrets. Have lunch with him, or dinner, go out dancing. Don’t take things so
seriously. Enjoy yourself.’

Their meals arrive. She picks around the white spears of asparagus. The knife slices through the muscle of the steak, pink ooze from the meat spreads across the plate. She holds the cut meat on the tip of her fork but is unable to bring it up to her mouth.

She thinks about the initials engraved in the pavement at the new sports pavilion in Stark Bay. *SS loves CB: One True Love.* Not such a long time ago. What will she say to Stephen about the apartment? What does he know? What will happen to her? To Vin she says nothing.

Stephen’s funny. She’s forgotten that. They go to Luna Park at Coney Island and between rides drink tequila, scoff refried beans wrapped in soft tortillas that make her mouth burn and her lips swell and tingle. They rug up in coats, hats and gloves to face the freezing night. “The Cyclone” ride brings her undone and she vomits in the darkened alley, tears and rage and spittle mingling in the dust. Stephen wipes her face with his handkerchief dampened with saliva, and kisses her for the first time since that first time, those years ago at the homestead.

‘Do you want to come up?’ she says, regretting it as soon as the words are out of her mouth.

‘Better not. Dad made it clear he wants me back early. It pays to humour the old bugger— he’s funding the trip.’ The tips of his fingers trail softly along the lines of her face. ‘I wish you were coming.’

‘Me too.’ She longs to tell him how much. ‘I’m flying back to Perth tomorrow. Maddie’s insisting on all of us having Christmas at Canterbury. I know we’ll only end up fighting.’

‘Give my best wishes to them all,’ Stephen says. He waves as the cab draws away.

Soft downy feathers of snow are falling. The city is lit like a Christmas tree. She hears the voices of the carol singers in the crisp air. Her hands are cold, even in thick mittens. She remembers the surf. She remembers hot dazzling sunshine and the scent of seaweed in the air. She remembers being soused in deep water.
In The Moonlight

It’s her thirtieth birthday today. The streets of the city shine, shafts of moonlight reflecting off wet glass. A car travels fast past her; she hears the slosh of the water before she feels it, her canvas shoes sodden, her feet numb with cold.

‘Frances?’

It’s someone on the footpath. From Starky. He has to remind her of his name. Even then she struggles to recall him.

‘What are you up to?’ Nick asks.

What’s it to you? she’s tempted to say, but there’s something in his face that softens her, makes her want him to like her.

‘You’re shivering. Me too, I don’t think I’ll ever get used to the cold down here. Come on, my car’s in the next street. I can drop you off.’

Nick turns the heater up. Steam from their wet clothing fills the car. ‘Where to?’

She can’t decide. She doesn’t want to go back to Neville’s place. Not there. He’s probably busily cleaning up where she threw the tomato sauce bottle, not at him, but a direct hit at the calendar. His life, every move he makes is tied up in that bloody calendar.

‘Frances?’

‘Frankie. I’m called Frankie.’

‘Do you want to come back to my place? I’ve got a flat, near the uni. I can make us hot chocolates.’ And when she doesn’t reply, ‘Coffee, some Stone’s Green Ginger if we’re lucky?’

‘Okay,’ she says, and he turns the car south.

The freeway is deserted, the immense shining streak of the road unfolding before them from the darkness. Either side, coloured lights float like iridescent streamers on the surface of the still, night-blackened water of the Swan River.

My birthday, Frankie muses– 27th August. How history marks you. What it meant to be born three months after that historic 1967 referendum. For over a hundred and fifty years of whitefellas– to be finally counted in the census, as a human being. She tries to imagine the fertile river estuary as it was in that time, measured by the six Noongar seasons, a system that acknowledged the living rhythm of the plants and animals– the songs, the knowledge, keeping the country safe. And in just a few lunar cycles, to be ruled by the calendar, the words you knew erased, their meanings discounted. Fenced out, sickening from diseases you had never known, starved, shot, raped…

The flat is small, but neat, comfortable. Nick flicks on the radio and Spiderbait fills the space.
‘I love this song,’ Frankie says and sings along a few lines.

‘Calypso.’ He can hardly say the name of the song without blushing. In New York. With Stephen fucking Satler.

‘What’re you doing down here?’ Frankie says, throwing her pack down by the couch.

‘First year uni.’ He’d always felt sure of his decision to enrol, but now he’s suddenly conscious of what she could say, if he tells her what he’s studying. Anthropology – haven’t we Aborigines been studied enough?

Frankie says, ‘You sharing with somebody?’

‘It’s my Dad’s. You know, the dentist in Carnarvon. When my parents come down, I move to the couch.’

‘Silver spoon, eh?’

‘No.’ He sounds aggrieved. ‘My father was a refugee from,’ he thinks before he says, ‘Europe.’

‘What part?’

‘Ukraine.’ It still makes him uncomfortable, that complicit, obfuscated history. At least his mother was born and bred here. ‘What can I get you– within the limited possibilities of my pantry. Toast? Coffee?’ In the light of the kitchen, he sees the traces of mascara, the exhaustion in her eyes.

They eat in the compact living room. She sits on the couch, he in the red vinyl beanbag his mother thought would suit his student status. He pours them each a glass of the Green Ginger Wine.

‘I hope you don’t mind, if I suggest …’ Nick says, ‘but do you want to stay the night? I mean, not … but if you want to sleep here that’s fine.’

She doesn’t answer. Her eyes are closed. She’s slumped there, sleeping.
Alec is in the living room with the television turned up. Best left alone. He doesn’t hold with Pauline Hanson. She’s ranting again about the divisive and discriminatory policies that privilege Aboriginal people and multi-cultural affairs. Even here, on the veranda, her fishwife voice penetrates Cynthia’s peace.

*It’s a threat to the fabric of the Australian culture, identity and shared values.* Counting votes, even the Prime Minister’s beginning to talk up her brand of what it takes to be “Australian”.

Cynthia focuses her attention on the pounding of the surf, a continuous, even drumbeat underpinning the thoughts that clamour without order and threaten to overwhelm her. The letter from Caly is folded and stored in her breast pocket, presses against her heart. She still cannot take it in, not really, that Madeleine would let her go, would encourage her to go, in the care of Vin Satler. Her little sister’s flaws are well known to her, God knows, but that she could be so naïve … so irresponsible.

After Dolly had told her what he’d done to Frankie, not long after it had happened, she had tried to discuss Vin, but Madeleine would not listen, had brushed it off as a case of things getting out of hand when young men are having fun, combined with Frankie’s own wild behaviour. The girl’s drinking, her reported vindictiveness towards whitefellas, Madeleine had argued, makes Vin a good target for her fanciful story. *I know him*, Madeleine had said. *He’s charming. And anyway, why would he? Do that? When he can have any woman he wants?*

She’s back in town, Frankie. But for how long is anyone’s guess. There’s a pattern to it, a good job in Carnarvon or Perth, and then after a year, sometimes even less, she’s back. Dolly does her best, but what can she do? Frankie’s a grown woman.

‘You intend sitting out here all night?’ Alec walks between her and the horizon, his shadow falling across her eyes so that she’s in darkness, the moonlit sky blocked from view.

‘Out here I don’t have to look at that despicable woman,’ Cynthia says. ‘You off to bed?’

Alec throws himself into the chair beside her. Ice clinks in his glass as he takes a drink.

‘Any mail?’

‘The usual junk.’

‘But you’ve heard from her?’ He can’t bring himself to say it: *have you heard from my daughter?*

‘Yes.’

She hears him shift in his chair. ‘And?’
‘She’s fine. You can read the letter if you like.’
‘It isn’t me she writes to.’ He swallows the last of the whiskey in one gulp. ‘She okay?’
‘She’s fine. The people are nice. She’s been skating. It’s freezing of course. They’ve had record cold temperatures.’
‘Your sister is a damned fool to let her go there on her own. The gun capital of the world.’
‘That’s hardly relevant, after the massacre at Port Arthur.’
‘And who’s going to pay the price for that– it’ll end up so that a bloke can’t even own a rifle.
Even Howard’s on the bandwagon.’
‘I hope they do round up the guns. And anyway, they’re not going to take yours. Everyone knows that farmers need guns.’
‘It’s still not safe. She’s just a kid. And with that damned Stephen sniffing around.’
‘Don’t start, Alec. *If it wasn’t for you, she’d be here for the holidays, not thousands of miles away.* ‘Anyway, he’s not in New York. He’s in Boston, miles away.’
‘If not him, there’ll be plenty more hanging around.’ *Just like her mother,* Cynthia knows that’s what he’s thinking. *You’d know,* she wants to say.
At the first flash of lightening, the dogs stir at her feet.
‘You were out all day,’ Alec says.
‘I decided to take a look at the south-eastern boundary, after that rain.’
‘Looks like we’re in for more.’
‘Good for the country. You know Alec, keeping the sheep off that area last year was a good decision. The vegetation’s thick and loaded with flower and seed, animals scurrying about everywhere – I couldn’t help but think of Dolly’s mob. I wish to god we could, oh, I don’t know – hand this place back to them, do something.’
‘You think that’s going to solve anything? In no time at all, everything that makes this a viable sheep station would be a wreck. You see what they’re like, how they live. Oh, not Dolly, of course, she’s a good woman, but even so, she wouldn’t have a clue how to run this place. And what about all the hangers-on?’
‘So you think we know how to run this place? With a huge overdraft, wool prices way down, the cattle worth bugger all. Years and years of hard work and what have we got to show for it?’
‘You should’ve been more like your sister– selfish. Instead of marrying me you could have a big house on the river, an apartment in London. Swanning round the world. Where is she now?’
‘Vienna.’
‘I know I’m a right sod a lot of the time, but we’ve done alright, haven’t we Cyn?’ Even hidden there in the darkness she can make out his features, tense with resentment and grief. He
reaches his hand towards her, finally placing it upon the armrest of the chair.

‘Looks like we’re in for a night of it,’ she says. The moon is hidden in the breakers of cloud building in the bruised sky, the smell of rain-damped earth already in the air. She stands, calls softly to the dogs. ‘I’m going to bed. Don’t forget Thornton’s coming tomorrow morning to discuss …’

‘For fuck’s sake, as if I need reminding. What’s to discuss? They’ll either give us the fucking money or they won’t.’

Cynthia doesn’t hear. Lightning sears the horizon like a great scar. When the thunder hits immediately overhead, she jumps. She barely makes it into the house before the curtains of rain seal them in.
2015
The meeting took no time at all. Considering. He’d expected a more protracted process with the Native Title holders; their lawyers are usually expert in derailing, in obstruction. But here they are, the Minister rounding things up after only a morning in negotiation.

‘Top work, Farrant.’ Vincent Satler is nodding at him now, very pleased with himself.

Certainly the offer on the table has turned the tide, an excellent balance of carrot and stick. Once they’d seen that nothing would stand in the way, that one way or another the deal was done, it wasn’t a matter of ‘if’ but ‘how much’. There’d been the usual to-ing and fro-ing over the amount, but even that had worked out better than he’d hoped. Funny buggers. They would fight to the death over their land, but once they were resigned to signing the contracts, they never really understood the need to fight hard for the rest of it, for the compensation, for the long term benefits. It sounds like a lot of money. One billion dollars. But over umpteen years and tied up every which way, the community would be lucky to get half of it. A walkover, the money side. He knows that from experience. And he’s never lost any sleep over it. On the contrary, that’s his focus in life, getting a good deal. He’s not racist, it’s the same whoever he’s dealing with.

He glances at his reflection in the glass panelling lining the conference room. Composed. The mask very much intact. It is his strength, his ally; this ability to maintain an air of dispassionate, nonaligned impartiality. Impartial or not, though, he can’t help a little smile when he thinks of Ms Caly Bell.

He pulls out his cell phone and keys in Selena’s number. It has been a very productive morning’s work. He feels very much like celebrating.
Slipping Away

Long after the last sobs have racked his body, Stephen stays in the garden. He wipes at his face with his hands. There’s no privacy, that’s the thing when you’re married with kids. He doesn’t want them to see.

‘Stephen.’ Ruth touches his shoulder, and when he turns to her, she’s there with a glass in her hand. ‘It’s too hot to be out here, darling.’

He accepts the glass without looking at her and drinks down the cool water. Tears form at the corners of his eyes.

‘Where are the kids?’ he asks, to keep his mind steady.

‘Mum’s taken them for the night.’

The tears flow now, in gratitude for Ruth, as well as all the rest. Leaning into her arms, he sobs again. When it subsides, she leads him inside, pushes him under a stream of cold water in the shower, towels him like a child. ‘Shh, shh,’ she says. ‘Such terrible news. I know how much you love Cynthia. It’s a terrible shock.’

In his robe he sits across from her in the living room.

‘I knew she had health problems but she seemed content, and happy to have Caly home. The thing is– it’s brought up things. Things I thought I’d worked through long ago.’

‘Caly?’ Ruth’s eyes are wide with worry, and sad.

‘This has nothing to do with us. It’s not about you, Ruthie. You do know that, don’t you?’ He takes a gulp of the whiskey she’s handed him. ‘I don’t know if I could even tell you what it’s about. It goes so far back. It’s not as if I need to tell you about my father. After all these years, you know how he operates. I’ve told myself there’s nothing more he could do that would surprise me, that could hurt me.’

‘But you love Caly so very much. I’ve always known that,’ Ruth says.

‘Yes, I love her. But Ruth, not to be with her, not in the way you might think. It’s such a mess, so fucking complicated.’

‘When you saw her this time, when you stayed at Canterbury. You slept with her?’

‘No! No, most definitely not.’ He sees her disbelief. ‘It’s not like that. Ruth, the truth is I didn’t even want to.’ He watches the swirl of the whisky as he swivels the tumbler in his hand. Ice cubes rattle against glass. ‘There is something between us, but it has nothing to do with now. How the hell can I explain it?’ He takes another gulp and moans as it burns down into his gut. ‘When we were kids, I thought I could never love anyone but Caly Bell. She was everything, so goddam
beautiful, so clever, so incredibly wild. But, thinking about it, the biggest thing was how different we were from the other kids. Her mother, my father. Not like any of the other parents.’ He lifts his head and looks across at her. ‘You’ve no idea what it’s like. Your parents are so normal. To love and hate a parent, both at the same time. A parent you’d do anything to get attention from, doesn’t matter, good or bad. And then, I can’t even understand it myself, to want more than anything to punish him. Caly’s never had a father— you can’t count Alec, pissed most of the time, and her mother would never tell her who her father was. In my case, well you know it too well. My mother didn’t exist, not in the sense that she was important to anything that was going on. It was uncanny, both of us in the same boat. None of the other kids understood what it was like.’ He downs the last of the whiskey. ‘I can talk about it, Ruthie, anything you want to ask I’ll try to answer. But these past few weeks, seeing her again, I’ve seen how much of what I’ve felt for her over the years is like, oh, I don’t know. It’s like she represents lost opportunity, what we both missed out on.’

‘Missed opportunities? Getting married? Kids? I don’t understand. What’re you getting at?’ Ruth asks, her eyes narrowing. He wants to reach out to her, smooth the ridges forming over her brow.

‘My father, Ruth. My goddam father. The road not taken. Why didn’t I ever stand up to him? I should have told him to go to hell.’ He stands, goes to the cabinet and pours himself another scotch, drinks half of it standing there. ‘I feel so ashamed, Ruth. I’ve known all along what he could do, anything to put him further on top. The way he treated Mum. And then there was you. I guess finding out about Caly, seeing what a goddam fool she’s been … even Caly.’ When he says this, his voice registers surprise, as if he still can’t take it in. ‘I’d kept it, you see, this illusion of her. She’d take them on, these egotistical pricks that think the planet is here to satisfy their greed. Caly Bell, mighty warrior-woman, would take them all on. Her passion, her films, they’d really mean something. At the same time though, my heart aches for her, because, well because when it comes to Vincent Satler, I know better than anyone how hard it is to win.’ He walks to her, sits beside her. ‘I’ve resigned. From the paper.’

With a sharp intake of breath, Ruth turns her head to face him. He waits for her outburst, notices the fine lines that have formed around the edges of her mouth. They’re both heading towards forty, not the best time for him to be without a job.

Ruth laughs, says, ‘You think I’m upset! But it’s the best thing you’ve done since, well, since you decided you wanted to be with me.’ She throws herself into his arms, crying, laughing. ‘What’re we going to do?’

‘You tell me, wonder woman. Don’t say all those years of dreaming were for nothing.’

‘Some land down south? Our own straw-bale house. Chooks in the garden, an organic garden
with everything we need to live?’

‘Except money,’ Stephen says.

Ruth laughs. ‘We’ll be fine. We’ll have to sell this place.’

‘It always felt too big.’

‘Do you mean it, Stevie? You’d leave the city?’

‘The kids?’

‘Perfect. They’ll want horses, though. And probably another dog.’ She sits back, holding his hands. ‘What do you want to do about Caly? She must be devastated. Everything coming at once like this.’

‘Thankyou, Ruth.’ He tears up again. ‘If you’d go to the funeral … I can’t face it … Canterbury without Cynthia. I’ve loved that place so much. It was the closest I ever came to a home, before this, before you. Do you understand? Will you go?’ When she nods he leans forward and kisses her. Lightly. ‘I plan to fly to the US as soon as possible. I need to have it out with Dad once and for all. And then, after that’s all over, we’ll go look for a place.’
Nick manages to get Geoff Harvey’s boat for the day. He and Liam are up early, loading gear. His camera is stowed safely in the small cabin that, apart from a canvas canopy, is the only part of the boat protected from sea and sun.

‘The others should be here soon.’ Nick looks at his watch. ‘You got that last esky?’ Liam is tall and lean, his dark hair curling like a wave over his forehead. It’s like looking into a mirror, though the image there is of a long time ago. Liam knows a lot more than he did at that age. When Nick was fourteen, he didn’t have a clue. ‘Have you put on sunblock?’

‘Leave off, Dad. You’re worse than Mum.’

‘We’re here!’ Pippa’s daughters Sophie and Isobel tumble across the strip of sand that separates the carpark and the jetty. The others follow. Pippa and Caly carry a large orange esky between them. Jamie Watson balances a crate on his head, his other arm wrapped around a young woman carrying a smaller esky.

‘We’re only going out for the day,’ Nick says, eyeing each container as they set them alongside the boat. ‘Caly, my son, Liam.’

Caly looks drained and very small, standing alongside Pippa and her two robust girls, and Jamie Watson, who is tall and muscular. He has his mother’s good looks, without the scars and the pain in his eyes. ‘Have you met Jamie, Frankie’s boy, and Rohanna Conway?’ Nick sees the interest in Caly’s eyes, meeting Jamie. ‘They’ve just graduated from WAAPA with flying colours.’

‘WAAPA?’ Caly asks.

‘West Australia Academy of Performing Arts.’

‘They both play and sing,’ Pippa says. ‘Maybe you could do something together?’

‘I’ve heard a lot about you, Jamie,’ Caly says.

‘All good I hope. You’re a muso and an activist?’ Jamie asks. Caly nods.

‘It was brill what you did at the hub. I would’ve loved to do that. It’s gone totally viral. My friends think it’s so cool,’ Rohanna says. She’s younger than Jamie, perhaps seventeen. She’s one of those women who cannot help but delight; each time Nick sees her he’s drawn in by her *joie de vivre* – her cropped hair streaked with orange and purple dye, her face adorned with rings and studs. The message on her t-shirt is clear, a human dressed up like an ostrich with its butt in the air, its head in the sand. On one rounded haunch the words: *My friends say I’m in denial.* On the other: *But that’s a total lie.*

‘No way, Ro. I wouldn’t want you flashing your parts for the camera.’ Jamie laughs,
sounding as though he means it. ‘And too much, Mum getting her gear off.’

‘I did and I’m proud of it,’ Pippa says. ‘I can’t believe all this crap over a few women posing nicketty. You can see more in Rickson’s newsagency any day of the week. And we had good reason—a clean and peaceful place, that’s all we want. Isn’t that better than a shit-pile of toxic plutonium? Anyway, flashing our gear’s about the only way we women can get some attention.’

‘Go Girls!’ Rohanna yells, raising a clenched fist in solidarity. ‘Frankie said she was with you in spirit but she’s always been scared of climbing things. Abseiling is great. Remember Jamie? On camp? I was shitting my pants at first, but once you learnt to trust them, it was really cool. Still, Frankie was there to drive the bus.’

‘Where is your mother? She’s late.’ Nick’s annoyed.

‘Oh, I forgot. She’s not gonna make it,’ Jamie says. ‘She’ll catch us later, with Nan. She says give her a ring when we get back. They’re organising a feed.’

‘And Geoff’s on one of his five-star junkets to Broome,’ Pippa says.

‘Sorry for Cynthia,’ Jamie says quietly to Caly as they walk down towards the boat moored off the jetty. Caly is touched. Cynthia has been gone a month and the invisible chords that have connected them are still pulling at her. She thought she had escaped them, only to find they are as strong as ever. Bound together since the death of Madeleine by a kind of shame, and the overwhelming need to protect one another and themselves. Never talked about directly of course, that would have been too raw. A conspiracy of silence. Surely neither of them wanted to leave so much unsaid. But how were they to start? Now there is so much pain, and so much she will never know.

Several other boats are being backed and rolled down the slipway. People yell greetings before climbing aboard and heading out onto the water.

‘A perfect day for it,’ an old man calls as Jamie unhitches the rope that holds them to the land and leaps aboard.

The forecast is for a late sea breeze. The water spreads like a turquoise-coloured bed sheet ironed flat and smooth. Puffs of snow-white foam float in the wake of the boat. The town is a speck on the horizon. Nick feels his frustration evaporate.

He and Pippa had talked the trip over.

‘It’ll be good for her. She loves it on the water and she’ll be with friends. She can’t hide away from the world forever. She’s got to come out sometime,’ Pippa had said with her usual certainty.

The kids move forward and sit with their legs dangling above the surge that rises where the bow ploughs into the water. Jamie and Rohanna are perched on the rear rail of the boat. Nick stands at the steering wheel, Caly and Pippa beside him, their faces hidden behind dark glasses, large hats.
‘Whales, Dad,’ Liam screams.  
‘Well spotted, Liam.’ Three humpback whales float on the surface, the water white with spume. Nick points. A dozen plumes, as if spot fires had broken out along the horizon: the cows travelling south with their newborns. ‘The last time we were out here, must’ve been a few months ago, there were hundreds of them,’ he says. ‘You know, when they breach like that, other whales can hear them way down deep in the ocean. They’re signalling to one another.’  
‘I love watching them teach the babies how to breach,’ Pippa says. ‘The little ones copying everything the mother does. Their little flippers slapping up and down. I loved Ocean Blues. The footage of the dugongs birthing and caring for their babies was so beautiful. And the whales, of course.’  
‘Pity Geoff doesn’t feel the same way,’ Caly says. ‘I don’t get it, Pippa. Why stay with him, when you know very well what he’s up to?’  
‘Look who’s talking!’ Pippa says, suddenly annoyed. ‘Okay, he can get carried away, but it’s Geoff who’s put this town on the map. Without him we’d still be in the dark ages. The middle of nowhere. Nothing happening.’  
‘I’m sorry. I’ve misunderstood. I thought you didn’t want the hub,’ Caly says. ‘You were right there, with us.’  
‘It’s not a fucking career for me, Caly. So, I don’t want the uranium dumped here. That doesn’t mean my entire life has to be taken over. I have to live here. I can’t just pack up and go, like you. What was the point of the masks, if everybody knows who we are?’ She looks away from them, out over the sea. ‘You speak about him as if he doesn’t care. He loves coming out on the boat. He only wants what’s best for this town. And I know he would never do anything to hurt us.’ She turns back and says, ‘Unlike Satler, who couldn’t give a shit as long as it makes a dollar. Geoff really loves this place.’  
‘You’re right in that, Pippa. Outlays and profits, that’s what’ll count at the end of the day. Anyway, you’ve both got rotten taste in men, if you ask me,’ Nick says.  
‘Well, I didn’t,’ Pippa snaps.  
When she moves away, he asks Caly, ‘How are you feeling?’  
‘How do you think? After that tirade.’  
‘Geoff Harvey’s her husband. If she admits he’s a total shit, then what?’ He places a hand lightly on her arm. ‘I wasn’t thinking about that. I was thinking about Cynthia. Are you okay?’ He releases his hand and adjusts the steering wheel. ‘She would’ve liked the funeral, simply done, natural, with just her very good friends.’ Caly doesn’t answer. ‘And you. The song— it was perfect.’  
‘She had it all arranged, what she wanted,’ Caly says. ‘I didn’t have to do anything. She
didn’t want a big public thing.’ Tears well in her eyes. ‘Of course she wanted Maddie’s *Lakme*—
“The Flower Duet”. Cynthia loved that song more than anything. Having to sing after that perfect
recording, Anna Netrebko and my mother– I swear it was the hardest thing I ever did.’

‘To hear the two of you, your mother and you– it was such a privilege to be there. No sign of
Stephen at the funeral?’

‘But Ruth came, for them. You know Stephen’s quit, they’re moving south.’

‘Bloody hell.’ He looks at her again. ‘I didn’t get a chance to speak to her. How did you feel
about him not being there?’

‘Stephen’s away. In the States. He loved Cynthia. So very much. I know that.’

‘I’m so sorry, Caly. It’s such a shock. I still can’t believe it, and on top of everything else.
You know I’d do anything, if I can help in any way.’

‘I keep thinking of all the things I could have said, that I should have said.’

‘I know. When Dad died all the shit peeled away and I was left with this overwhelming sense
of my own failings, asking myself all the time why I couldn’t appreciate him when he was here. Not
that you didn’t appreciate Cynthia. She was so proud of you, and your work. And she knew how
much she meant to you, Caly.’

‘The parents I never really had? She sure filled in some of the holes. The sad thing is
whatever she did, however she looked out for me, it was never enough. You know Nick, I still don’t
know, she would never tell me about my father. And stupid me, I was still hanging out for
something, anything from my mother.’

‘Difficult to be born like that, so driven, so much talent. It can’t have been easy for her.’

‘That’s what Cynthia always said. But why have a child?’

‘Why indeed? What do you think of Liam?’

‘He’s lovely, Nick. He reminds me of you back then. How old is he?’

‘I was twenty-one when he was born. While you were off carving out your brilliant career,
Andrea and I were making babies.’

‘My not so spectacular career, as it turns out.’

‘Everything you do is spectacular, Caly. Even your cock-ups,’ Pippa says, handing her a light
beer. ‘Nick?’

‘Better not. We’re about twenty minutes from the islands. We can anchor in Lonesome Bay.
Take the dinghy ashore in time for lunch.’

‘Turtle, Mum, look,’ Pippa’s girls shout.

‘Pippa, can you take the wheel?’ Nick says, grabbing his camera.

Through the lens, he makes out the tiny head extended on the long neck just like a periscope.
The turtle dips its head and dives. Nick follows the trajectory with his camera, sees the little head extending above the swell, reaching for air. It makes him want to weep, every time, touches his soul, the vulnerability of the turtle’s femaleness. A gentle creature, yet so tough, so resilient.

‘Can I look?’ Jamie asks.

‘Sorry mate, there’s nothing to see. This isn’t a digital camera. Old-fashioned, eh? I have to take it back, develop the film, print them out. Do you want to have a go?’ He points to where the turtle last appeared, helps guide the camera in Jamie’s hands. ‘You’ve got to be a few steps ahead of the subject. Imagine in your mind their next move. Mostly you won’t guess right, you’ll be wrong. But when you guess right, that’s when you’ll get the photograph you are after. Like when you are playing your music, exactly the same. The secret’s not to think, but feel. Okay, it’s all yours now.’

Chased by larger fish, schools of small fish wheel in the translucent water. Flying fish use the flat surface as a runway, take off and fly metres before plummeting back into the sea. The wild call of seabirds heralds the sandy shores of Lonesome Island.

‘I only took a couple,’ Jamie says handing over the camera. ‘I don’t think they’re any good. Every time I went to take it, she dived. I like digital better, you can delete the bad ones.’

Nick brings the boat into the lee of the bay. Jamie tosses out the anchor. Below them, the reef extends from the boat towards the shore like the skeletal remains of a gigantic prehistoric beast. The water slaps gently at the side of the boat as they lower the rubber dinghy into the water and load everything they need for the picnic.

‘I’ll swim from here,’ Jamie says. In the end they all swim towards the island except Nick and Pippa, who bring the inflatable with the supplies.

‘It’s warm,’ Rohanna yells from the water. ‘So many fish.’

In that soundless world, secreted below the surface of the sea, they see lionfish, their fins floating like the folds of a flimsy ball gown, and tiny clownfish bathing among the spidery tentacles of sea anemones. A giant manta ray dislodges in a puff of sand to rush away from them. Glittering damselfish dart among the delicate corals. As they come closer to the shore, large fish with pearly pink scales and big friendly eyes nuzzle their legs; curious, not afraid of their presence.

On the sandy beach they pick from the platter Pippa’s prepared, rolls filled with cheese, cold meats, salad.

‘Let’s walk across to the other side of the island, Mum,’ says Sophie, the youngest. ‘Remember Izzy, when Dad took us we saw that dead sea snake on the beach?’

‘Can I go with them, Dad?’ Liam asks. Nick nods.

‘I’ll come,’ Rohanna says. ‘What about you, Jamie?’

‘Nah. Feeling slack after all that food,’ Jamie says. ‘It’ll be windy on the south side. It’s more
better here.’

But the kids are determined to find out for themselves. Under the shade cloth he’s put up, Nick lies back, resting his hat over his face. Listens. Excited voices fading as the kids leave with Pippa.

‘Mum could’ve killed you, she was so pissed off about those photographs,’ Jamie says.

‘I don’t blame her.’ Nick hears Caly’s voice, careful, edgy.

‘Why’d you go with an old fella like him? An’ he went with your own mother too.’ She doesn’t answer. ‘Mum hates Vincent Satler more than anything.’

‘There’s a lot to hate.’

‘After what he done to her, you know,’ Jamie says.

‘There’s nothing I can say,’ Caly says. Nick notices the pain in her voice. She knows.

‘Geez, it’s hot,’ he says, sitting up. Caly and Jamie jump, thinking that he’s dozing. Nick rummages in the esky and offers cool drinks but the young man leaps up.

‘I’m going in again. The reef’s changed, for sure, but it’s still better than close to town. Not over there, but. That heatwave in 2010– nothing left but a whopping bit of bleached reef.’

Nick hands Caly a bottle of water. ‘How’re you doing?’

‘You don’t need to keep asking, I’m okay, Nick, all right?’

‘Sorry, it’s just I heard Jamie giving you the third degree.’

‘He’s fine. He’s like her, isn’t he? You and Liam, Frankie and Jamie. The DNA coming through. Do your girls take after you or Andrea?’

‘Andrea, luckily for them.’

‘Why did you two break up, Nick? You seemed so compatible, so solid. Out of everyone I never thought…’

‘A stupid fling at a conference in Ontario, she retaliates with a neighbour, and on it went from there.’ Nick downs his water in a few gulps. ‘Stupid. Careless.’

‘I dreamt last night, Nick, about my father,’ Caly says. ‘I’m running, that slow-motion kind of running, like you do in dreams. I’m calling, but my voice catches in the wind and I run and run, yet I never get any closer to him.’ Nick stands, extends his hand and pulls her onto her feet, embracing her until her sobs subside.

‘Coming in?’ he asks.

They swim strongly until they are above the reef, leaving behind them on the beach all those troublesome words.
The sea is choppy. Nick guides the boat as it slaps into the waves. Dolphins chase them in the backwash.

‘You probably don’t remember, when we were kids, maybe nine, ten years old, the oil tanker *Korean Star* spilt hundreds of tonnes of fuel onto the beach.’ He points with his free hand to the coastline stretching south of the proposed hub.

‘No, I don’t remember that. Do people have any idea of what they’re in for? This will be a super highway. Hundreds and hundreds of ships moving back and forth, and not only oil,’ Caly says. ‘No more playing on boats and picnicking on the islands. And carnage for these beautiful beings.’

The dolphins, as if hearing, veer away and dive out of sight.

‘An aspect of the human condition, I guess, unless it’s happening to us we don’t seem to have the faintest idea of what it will mean for the future.’

‘*You don’t know what you’ve got till it’s gone.*’ Caly sings the line.

‘Something like that,’ Nick says. Is that how it was? Did he not know what he had with Andrea until she was gone? He watches Liam and the girls laughing together.

‘What’s the plan?’ Pippa places her arm around Caly’s shoulders, their earlier spat seemingly forgotten.

‘You right to take the wheel for a while, Pippa? There’s heaps of shit on the southern side of the construction I’d like to photograph for the article I’m doing for Habitat magazine.’

‘A picture is worth a thousand words?’ Pippa says, taking the wheel.

‘Something like that. Look how murky the water is, even this far out.’

‘You still thinking of making the film?’ Pippa asks.

‘Geez, Pippa, what do you think?’ Caly looks at the other woman. Is she really this naive?

‘Cyril Watson’s made sure that’s not going to happen.’

‘From this angle you get such a different perspective,’ Rohanna says. ‘The hub, it’s so big.’

The tide is out. At least fifty huge concrete pylons rise out of the watery mud, the steel structure branching above them. Shags have already colonised the struts directly above the high water mark. They stare out as the boat edges closer, disinterested and compliant, like a row of black-and-white-robed nuns and priests waiting for communion. Nick takes dozens of shots, pleased with the dusk’s light. Pippa takes the boat to within metres of the construction and he photographs the underbelly, the monolithic proportions.


‘Someone has to make a record of what’s lost,’ Nick says. ‘I wonder what archaeologists will think when they find this relic? They’ll wonder why it became extinct,’ he jokes to the kids.
‘Like dinosaurs,’ Liam says.

‘No archaeologists but,’ Jamie says. ‘All us mob’ll be gone long before this thing, I reckon.’

‘That’s a stupid thing to say, Jamie. Just because there’s development at Stark Bay doesn’t mean the whole world’s going to end.’

‘Shit, Pippa, what’s up with you today? Just because your stupid husband’s all for it,’ Jamie says.

Nick is watching Caly. She’s moved to the rear of the boat, turned her back to them, and to the construction. He thinks she may be crying.
Fire

Despite Pippa’s resolve to get away, the girls’ persistence wins out. Frankie has a fire going and they settle on the beach to eat the meal that she and Dolly have brought down. From tin plates they eat spicy fish curry and rice, and a fresh loaf of bread that Dolly’s made. They have set a large billycan on the fire for tea.

‘Are you sure there’s enough for us?’ Pippa asks several times, until Dolly ignores her. It makes Nick smile. Whitefella proprieties are no match for Dolly’s sense of community. Even should there not be “enough”, any food would be shared. She’s been taught this from infancy, and her children too; the adults poke portions of food into little mouths, pull it out, exaggerate the act of eating it all up, before pushing a portion back into the child’s mouth. For all the years she’s lived here in Yamatji country, Pippa has no idea.

As soon as they got off the boat, Dolly had taken Caly’s hand and sat her down beside Frankie, so that Caly is protected between the mother and daughter. She’s moved by their kindness. Above, the sky like a quilt studded in diamonds.

‘Kids in New York think stars are things from picture books. They’ve never seen stars. Imagine,’ Frankie says. ‘How is it possible that so many stars can even fit up there?’

‘In the city you can forget things like that,’ Caly says.

‘She’s up there looking over you, don’t you ever forget that,’ Dolly says. ‘She never wanted to leave this place. When she first came she was like a little duck out of water, but this place got under her skin for sure. Would never let her go.’

‘You better watch out, Caly, this place’ll get its claws into you and you’ll never be able to leave us,’ Pippa says.

‘No chance,’ Caly says sharply. She looks around the circle, sorry for what she has said.

‘She’s a wanderer, an explorer. What’s the longest you’ve ever stayed in one place?’ Nick says.

‘I hate being away from here,’ Frankie says.

‘That didn’t stop you from going,’ Jamie prods.

‘It’s not as though I could stay, eh? And now I’m here, they’re doing their best to fuck it up. Like everything. We can’t stop it, can we?’

No-one speaks. At last Jamie says, his voice teasing, ‘Nan, it’s a fish out of water.’

‘What?’ Dolly doesn’t understand.

‘You said a duck out of water, it’s a fish.’
‘Oh, fish or duck, what does it matter if you lost your home? Eat your tucker and leave your old Nan alone.’

‘Your grandmother has forgotten more in her long lifetime than we will ever know,’ Nick says. ‘I hope I can remember as much when I’m her age.’

‘She’s not that old. Plenty of years in the old girl yet,’ Frankie says. Then, remembering Cynthia, she changes the topic. They talk instead about the shift in weather patterns, the tsunami in the South Pacific, and the recent bombing attack in the US.

‘I’m glad I won’t be around for much longer,’ Dolly says. ‘All you kids, better get off your arses, like Caly here, get doing something to put a stop to it.’

Nick studies Frankie and Caly in turn, the fire burning brightly between them, casting traces of firelight upon their bare skin. Something has shifted. But not enough for them to relax. Not that either of them are prone to that, he thinks, both too wired.

‘Sing with us, Caly?’ Rohanna asks, picking up the guitar.

‘I…’

‘From Little Things Big Things Grow,’ Isobel begs.

‘There’s an old gypsy saying that goes something like evil cannot dwell where music plays.’ Caly says. And then she sings. Later, when Liam and the girls have fallen asleep, she moves to sit by Pippa. ‘I’m sorry, about today. What I said was uncalled for. What’s up?’

‘Everything. Geoff’s heard of course.’

‘Not a happy chappy?’

“Well, he’s got a point. I have made it difficult for him. But that’s not the issue, is it? I guess what’s going on between us has been coming for so many years. We don’t see eye-to-eye on most things, nowadays.’

Nick doles out whiskey into plastic mugs, throws a couple more logs on the fire and says, ‘Will you tell us one of the stories you’ve been writing, Frankie?’

‘What’s this?’ Pippa says, her voice lighter. Sophie’s curled in her lap, sleeping. ‘I didn’t know you were a writer. What stories? Dreamtime stories?’

Frankie sighs, then says, ‘No, Pippa. That’s whitefella talk, “dreamtime” stories. Our people weren’t asleep when they got those stories, they are stories of cosmology, of how this place came to be, how to live in it the proper way. Anyway, my stories are not about that, they’re about what happened in this place less than two hundred years ago.’

‘Oh,’ Pippa says, looking down into the fire.

‘When the settlers came here and took the land, and began doing things the wrong way. Unsettling stories. So, you may not want to hear them.’ Frankie’s eyes flare in the flickering light.
She glances at Dolly. When Dolly nods, she goes on, ‘They’re not my stories. I’m the one that’s writing them down, but they’re stories I’ve been told by people from round here. Mum wants me to write them down, before nobody remembers them anymore.’

‘Nick told me a bit about what you’re doing,’ Caly says. ‘Such painful stories.’

‘But true,’ Frankie says. ‘Just kept buried for a long time.

‘Deadly, Mum.’ Jamie sits up, respectfully. ‘We’re all ears.’

‘A shame none of us buggers can understand in language, only English, except for Mum of course.’ She picks up a stick and carefully draws circles in the sand. Then she begins, her voice firm and clear.

‘This is the story of two brothers, called Boolyanu and Mangatha. One day they went to get a feed for their family. Times were tough because the wadjela had come and got hold of all the waterholes and without the waterholes there was none of the usual game for them to spear. So they decided to hunt for some of the new animals that were on their country.’ Frankie pauses. In the darkness they hear the sounds of the ocean lapping just metres from where they sit, the fire spitting and crackling in their midst. Frankie continues.

‘Boolyanu places the spear in his thrower and raises his arm to strike. The animal stands steady before him, gazing at him with unblinking and unknowing eyes. It’s so easy. The spear flies through the air and strikes its target through the side, right into the heart. The beast falls to the ground. He sees that his brother Mangatha has also made a kill. Laughing, he shouts to them, “They’re not like kangaroo, they just stand there and wait for our spears to strike.” He thinks of how many of their best hunting dogs have been shot by the white man, that it is fortunate that dogs aren’t needed to hunt such a cumbersome animal. Boolyanu heaves the huge bulk of the animal up onto his shoulder and walks towards his countrymen. Unlike the kangaroo, it’s difficult to balance and he entwines his fingers into the unfamiliar hair to grip it. He’s feeling proud and happy. For many months now, game’s been scarce. For a long time his mob have existed on the food from the women, seed damper, small goannas and mammals, an occasional perentie. He puzzles at the change. Tonight’s been no exception. They have seen no kangaroos and emus. This has always been a plentiful place to camp; a time when they could all eat well and restore strength. They’ve spoken of it, of course, and have come to believe that the white man’s taken all the game for himself. But at least they’ve brought with them on the big ships these strange beasts, in exchange, and the meat’s satisfying and good. He catches up with the group of men as they begin the long walk back to where the women and children are waiting. They’ll be pleased to eat well.’ In the firelight, Frankie eyes her audience. The story holds them, she sees this in the stillness of their bodies, in their unwillingness to break the spell. Her voice still deep and strong, she continues.
‘Caught up in their success, they don’t hear the sound of horses pounding towards them; dogs barking and men shouting as the white fellas bear down on them with frightening speed. The warning cries come too late to run. Boolyanu can just make them out, white men in the pale dawn light. There are many, riding big, dark horses. And wielding rifles. The riders surround them. He and the others are herded into the centre. “Garla gurrjarda,” Yawitch whispers, fire spear. Boolyanu feels waves of fear pulse through his blood. His first instinct is to run. But his countrymen stand silent and proud; resolute, knowing escape is impossible.’

The wood on the fire spits and flares. There is the sound of a vehicle in the distance. Frankie waits while Pippa rearranges Isobel, sleeping in her arms.

‘One of the white men, the uniformed trooper, is yelling orders to them now. He waves the rifle and demands they drop the animals to the ground. Boolyanu can’t understand the words, but the message is clear. Like all the others, he does as he is told. The sun is strong now, and he can see there’s big trouble; the white men are extremely hostile and angry. He recognises the man next to the trooper. It’s Boss from the homestead. A shout goes up. His brother Mangatha is running, running through a gap in the horses and running, running to freedom. He feels the ripple surge through his countrymen, and he knows that he too has to run, run for freedom. His friends shout, so much noise; the horses wheeling, rearing their massive forelegs and pounding their hooves into their path. Boolyanu looks for an opening amongst the animals and races towards it, and into his country beyond.’

Frankie pauses, reaches for the water bottle and drinks. It’s as if the group has stopped breathing, their bodies quiet, still.

‘A shot rings out. Boolyanu stops. He’s never heard such a sound before, but he’s heard the stories his brothers have told him of the white mans’ fire spears for killing. He sees Mangatha fall. One after another the shots ring out and his brothers are falling. He turns to look back at the white men sitting on their horses. There is emptiness in their eyes; he can see what they mean to do.

“Take no prisoners,” the trooper’s shouting, “no prisoners.”

Boolyanu doesn’t understand what he’s saying. But he runs, runs, runs. The raised gun’s fired, the bullet travelling with such speed that Boolyanu has no chance of escape. He falls heavily, like a big boomer, dead.’

Nick’s cheeks are wet. He wipes his face with the sleeves of his shirt. He hears Caly’s sobbing, longs to reach out and comfort her. The story fills all the space, has taken them from this place to somewhere just as real.

‘What a terrible story, Frankie,’ Pippa says. ‘It was like we were there.’

‘I haven’t finished with you yet,’ Frankie says firmly. ‘Boolyanu’s son sees everything that’s
happened. He’s the witness.’ Before she goes on, she looks around the circle of bowed heads. ‘He’s the one that’s told us, that means we know what happened back then. This is his story.’ Then she resumes.

‘Up on my rocky perch, my head reels with all that I’ve seen; like some terrible spirit dream, I can’t believe it’s real. I’m crying out but I feel Jelungi’s restraining arm, urging me to be quiet and not reveal our hiding place. He’s a senior man. He’s seen many battles. He knows the value of caution when the numbers are so much in the enemy’s favour. With our own eyes we’ve seen the speed, the brutality of the white man’s attack. A strange silence hangs over the valley. Even the birds have ceased their song. From my position on the rocks above, I can see the white men dismounting from their horses, rolling tobacco, walking slowly around, surveying the scene. Some fifteen bodies lying without movement; the sap of their life flowing back into the red earth of our country. I hold my hand over my mouth, suppress a wail, but the tears gush like blood, blood gushing from a wound down my face.’ Frankie stops speaking, her breath audible in the silence. Nick bends forward, throws another piece of wood on the fire. All of them in the circle watch as the sparks catch in the updraft and swirl upwards towards the night sky. Only when they look back to her does she continue, her voice urgent.

“‘We must wait,” Jelungi says, “until the white men are gone. And then we’ll go to them.” But as he speaks, the white men begin to walk towards our relations who lie scattered on the ground. As I see what they plan to do, my mind cries out in denial, “No, no, please, no!” They begin to haul up the bodies into a huge mound. We watch, stricken with shock and fury, filled with sorrow, as they pull man after man to the pile of corpses. Men drag large branches from the clump of timber that stands in the valley and throw them onto the bodies, the bodies of our countrymen. They stand around, talking, urinating, smoking while the huge pyre flames. They toss on sticks, from time to time, to keep the fire raging. The sun reaches its highest point and then is low again in the sky before they’re done. But, as in all things, it comes to an end. They mount their horses and head south.’ Frankie drinks from the bottle again. Her voice breaks, softens.

‘Some time passes. Neither of us speaks. It’s always been, it’s the way of our people, that the deceased must first go to his own home, before he goes to the place of the dead. Should a man die, as these men have today, away from home, there are certain things that need to be done, to ensure their spirit will know the way. But now these things cannot be done. I am numb with the pain, for I had never thought to see such a thing. It is beyond everything I might have imagined. I wonder if I’ll ever be able to make words again; if I’ll be forever a silent witness to this most violent of events. At length, Jelungi, strong and silent by my side, rises and begins to move quickly across the rocks and down into the gully. I try to follow, but as soon as I rise the bile spews from my mouth and for
several minutes my body holds me captive to my grief and fear. By the time I have reached the low
land, Jelungi has flung himself onto the earth beside the mound of ash. He’s wailing in open despair.
Fear has lifted and we’re overcome with the pain of our loss. The loss of so many. Our men of
exceptional skill and high degree, the heart of our tribe.’

The listeners do not stir, but sit, watching the flames of the fire die down. Eventually, Dolly
takes Caly’s hand and pats it, then clambers to her feet.

‘Come on, you mob,’ she says. ‘It’s time to go home.’
Orchid Island

The homestead is bare. They decided to keep only the strongest furniture; the heavy dining room table, bookshelves, a couple of the dressers, the couches and the cane chairs. Cynthia’s books, the rugs, all those bits and pieces that collect around a person’s life, have been packed up and taken away. Caly has kept the piano. It took the four removalists this morning to carry it out and load it into the truck, wrapped in wool blankets and calico to be transported to Perth. To be stored, they gather, for Caly isn’t staying there.

‘I guess we’ll get used to it,’ Nick says. ‘It’ll take on a whole new life of its own.’

‘Not me,’ Dolly says. ‘It’ll always be the Marsdens’ place to me.’

‘You worked here for a long time, Auntie,’ Nick says.

‘Since I was a youngster, on and off. We was travelling in them years.’

‘In my wildest dreams, I could never have imagined it, that this is our place.’ Frankie holds a painting in position on the wall. ‘What about here?’

‘Down a bit,’ Nick says. ‘Here, I’ll hold it. See what you reckon.’

‘We can use this place in anyway we want, can stay here for as long as we want, no more relocating to some crap corner of town. It legally, truly belongs to all of us,’ Frankie says.

‘No-one can take this land away. This land going nowhere. It’s people that gets taken.’ Dolly sits upright, her hands clasped in her lap. Frankie can see it, she’s tired, her heart sad. ‘When are Jamie and Ro off?’

‘Oh, not for a few days. Cyril’s bringing them out later. They’re staying here until it’s time to head to Perth. Jamie’s organized a lift for them.’

‘And Caly?’

‘She’s flying down. She said she’ll be out to see us before she leaves,’ Nick says. ‘She’s made all the arrangements so they know who to meet up with in Taipei and where to go. She’s going via America. She’ll meet Jamie and Rohanna on Orchid Island.’

‘Well, I don’t much like it, them two going that long way. They’re just kids. Orchid Island sounds pretty good and then they tell you it’s just a dump for their rotten nuclear poisons. What they want to go there for?’

‘Caly’s film, remember? It’ll be good for them, good money, playing music, meeting the indigenous mob from Taiwan. I wouldn’t mind going myself,’ Frankie says.

‘No way, girl. You’re not going anywhere. This is your place now.’ Dolly places her hands either side of the armchair and heaves herself to her feet. ‘Better get on with it. It isn’t going to run
‘She’s right, Frankie.’ Nick reaches for her. ‘You’ve got your work cut out now.’ They stand arm in arm. For as far as they can see, the wide, shifting ocean. Frankie imagines a place here, far away from the port, a haven, yes, a place where the bush can come back, the native animals too, a place where things can live and grow. Somehow, they’ll work out the problem with the road, make sure that uranium never cuts through this country. Where people can come to hear the stories, to listen, to learn to live the proper way in this place. The air feels clear, the light bright and fresh.

‘It’s early days, Nick. I know that. But I think we can do it. We can make something here, for all of us mob,’ she says.
Caly can’t get within coo-ee of the main beach. The beach she remembers from her childhood. Massive steel fences surround the facility. They go for miles along the sand dunes, a great rectangular enclosure that defines the keep-out zone and protects the entire hub. From people like her.

She’s standing on tip toes, on the uppermost dunes, where she can glimpse the sea below. It used to be turquoise, in her mind at least, but now she sees it’s dull. A dirty blue. Memories can be created. She knows this; it’s well documented that we reinvent, reconstruct, rememember in ways that suit who we think we are, who we want to be. But the ocean here was turquoise. Dazzling. Brilliant. Pure. It was. She remembers.

And now there’s nothing left of what she took for granted those summers on the beach. Those salad days, those days when she thought she’d only to reach for it and it could be hers.

She skirts along the top of the incline to the end of the enclosure, slips and slides in the warm sand until she’s at the base of the plant. The receiving ramps jut out into the water. The long grey steel beasts clank and rattle, and, even as she stands there, they heave black plumes of putrid smoke. Larger than life, structures that tower above and spread across the beach as if growing from some cankerous roots buried deep in the sand. Massive and uncompromising.

Along the shoreline, litter has gathered among the shells and the weed. In a gesture of detached curiosity, she flicks over a sodden hessian bag. A cormorant lies stiffly there among a pile of plastic bottles, bound in nylon wire, drowned in an ocean of waste. She shifts her gaze, staring out over the water, recalling the castles of coral, fish that darted in and out of a myriad hiding places in their kingdom, their world. In her youth they had suggested a quality of timelessness; she had not thought then that it could all disappear forever. She remembers the whale sharks that swam here. Majestic, and as it turns out, defenceless. She remembers Stephen.

‘Hey, you!’ A man is yelling at her from a platform above. ‘What the fuck d’ya think you’re doing?’

Caly brushes away her tears as if they are nothing. She begins walking. She thinks she might just keep walking, into the sea.
### List of Referenced Lyrics and Quotations

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<td>Dvorák, Antonín. ‘Song to the Moon’ from <em>Rusalka</em>. Musical score.</td>
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<td>“Earth am I” is a women’s goddess song, ‘author unknown’. (Please contact me if anyone feels their copyright has been infringed).</td>
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Introduction: Stories and Traces

Who decides what is margin and what is text? Who decides where the borders of the homeland run? Absences and silences are potent. It is the eloquent margins which frame the official history of the land. As for geography, there are divisions and boundary lines that fissure any state more deeply than the moat it digs around the nationhood. In every country there are gaping holes. People fall through them and disappear. Yet on every side there are also doors to a wider place, a covert geography under sleep where all the waters meet.

(Hospital 1993, 57)
In this dissertation I argue that place, memory and the imaginative elements of story making are intertwined in such a way as to make them inseparable—played out along the borders and in the margins of the nation’s grand narratives, each impossible to represent in direct, linear relationship. My purpose is to augment my practice as a creative writer as well as to contribute to the increasing interest in the way writers might engage with writing that allows for the shifting qualities of both place and memory, producing writing that opens to possibility and gestures to our connection to landscape as complex and indeterminate. Fundamental to identity and the sense of belonging, a sense of place is complex—an interconnection between the land and the sense of self that constantly shifts between the inner and outer world.

The haunting faark of a crow; the bush cracking like dry bones in high summer; wild whoops of kids doing ‘bombies’ in leaf-stained water; the acrid smell of sheep camped beside the windmill; rolling red dust storms, early rains, muddy boots. Mushrooms like white stones on the green pastures, picked and placed in the basket, simmering in home churned butter. Mallee roots on the open fire—the embers sparking and twirling up into darkness. This is the place of my childhood, the place I remember. Growing up on a farm in the Western Australian wheatbelt, pre-television, I was entertained by the stories my family told, and by the novels on my mother’s bookshelf. Imagination and memory were embedded in these stories. Entwined with a sense of place, this has led to a lifelong preoccupation with the representation of place in story making, an interest that informs my exploration of the inseparable nature of place and memory, and the writing and reading of stories.

I thought I knew this place, where I grew up and have lived out my life, a landscape that is reflected in my creative writing. But as this project developed, I began to see how my relationship with this landscape was tenuous, complex, and far from settled, and that my efforts to represent this relationship were demarcated by my own subjectivity and the delimiting nature of language. I cannot dodge the prickly fact that I am writing about place, and that my story necessarily touches on landscape and memory intrinsically connected to the colonial history of Western Australia. Accordingly, this thesis ascribes to the view that the nation’s colonial history is indelibly imprinted upon the landscape, as well as within the pages of the country’s literature, and argues that, mutable, impossible to pin down in its fluidity, the sense of place and its representation presents a challenge to even the most accomplished storyteller.

Within the nexus of place and memory, with its implicit connection to stories, I consider how the authors I have selected for the study negotiate representations of landscape in their writing. How
is the multi-layered and non-linear nature of landscape revealed? Where do the boundaries lie? How does the author make space for the volatilty, discontinuities and the multiple voices that any place intrinsically holds, in order to reveal its stories?

This project has also derived from almost two decades of living with Aboriginal communities in the Kimberley and on the Anangu Pitjantjatjara Lands in central Australia where I heard many stories and witnessed many ceremonial activities. The ceremonies are beautifully orchestrated—extraordinarily resonant *inma* comprised of ancient song, dance and symbols that have been faithfully handed from generation to generation. Nevertheless, these stories are nuanced and layered, evolving through generations, as people negotiate their roles as traditional custodians and contemporary storytellers.¹ In addition, and specifically for this project, my research has taken me on field trips to Yamatji country in the Gascoyne region, Wongatha country in the Eastern Goldfields and throughout the Noongar country of Western Australia where I live.²

The dissertation comprises a novella, *Windsong*, and an exegesis that engages with five significant Australian novels. Each novel negotiates the representation of place and memory and the way in which this is intrinsically linked to language and story making. Both components of this dissertation—the novella and exegesis—argue that memory and forgetting are complex aspects of social identity that are constructed discursively and always emplaced.

While in some sense the life of a writer is a solitary one, writing, like all aspects of human activity, flows from and is engaged with social and cultural life. Writers are themselves embodied and emplaced, and subject to the ebb and flow of human interest. Emplaced in the world, the writer’s imaginative world-frame is drawn from her/his lived experience of the past and the present. Emplacement provides the opportunity to reconstruct memory and in this way remembering becomes possible through various external triggers, whether they are physical, symbolic or social.

Set in contemporary times, the novella *Windsong* is a fictional account of a small seaside town situated in the Gascoyne region of Western Australia. The location is significant to the story as

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¹ *Inma* is a Pitjantjatjara term meaning a ceremony incorporating singing and dancing. The inma I have enjoyed have all been emplaced, thematic and based on a specific story.

² The fieldtrips involved close analysis of the geographic and social/cultural features as well as conversations with Indigenous elders about the content of my project and in particular the creative work. The research of the experience of Reverend John Gribble was an important component of the Gascoyne field trip. To inform the novella, I drew on the texts *Yamatji: Aboriginal Memories of the Gascoyne* (Bryan Clark 1992).
it is a representation of the north-west ‘outback’. Tracing imagined stories in the Gascoyne landscape, the novella follows Edward S. Casey’s idea of the “elective affinity between memory and place” (1987, 214). Furthermore it presents the opportunity to reference the story of Reverend John Gribble who traveled there in the 1880s, and who wrote one of Western Australia’s first books recounting the brutal and unlawful treatment of the local Indigenous people. The locale of the novella offers a landscape viewed through the dominant European perspective of the land as both climatically ‘uninhabitable’ and the source of mineral wealth, a view that starkly contrasts with the agency of Indigenous people and their relationship with the country. Mindful of what Ross Gibson (1992, 65) describes in the postcolonial context as “a sublime structuring void organizing all Australian culture”, in Windsong I have aimed for a style of writing that facilitates both mutability and connection, and a representation of place that reveals discontinuities, silences and uncertainties, while attesting to the longstanding and ongoing stories that linger in the landscape.

My exegesis is a critical exploration of the way that the five authors negotiate the Australian landscape in their work. I am interested in the intersecting stories that represent these places and the way that the nuanced and layered voices of everyday lives depicted in the novels constitute the cultural form of places. Each author is renowned for the evocation of a sense of place in their writing. However, my reading traces the way that the unsettled character of a ‘wounded’ Australian landscape shapes their representation of place in the novels. The dialectic of memory and counter-memory, the way that the landscape is inscribed and read, is central to hegemonic discourse and its subversion, and intrinsic to my discussion of the representation of place in literature. Resonating with this, my research is concerned with the potential for different modes of reading in terms of representation of the landscape, that is, for misreadings of the land’s topography. Through their interest in discursive power within the machinations of colonial and ongoing postcolonial politics, Jay Arthur and Paul Carter, as well as the work of Gibson, have particularly informed my understanding of the formation of the landscape and nationhood of Australia by naming, mapping and proprietorship.

I also draw on the work of Vijay Mishra and Bob Hodge (2005) who argue that postcolonialism involves an ongoing process of negotiated space, and Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin’s view that ‘postcolonial’ implies continuity of “all the culture affected by the
imperial process from the moment of colonisation to the present day” (1989, 2). But nothing is fixed—shadow lines, in the way that Stephen Kinnane has described, provide spaces of negotiation, shifting and changing, breaking and re-forming. “These lines of story shadow all of us” (2003, np). As part of a wider discourse that has developed within Australian literary criticism calling for more indeterminate reading and writing practices, the exegesis examines the facility of each novel to present multiple points of view through multiple voices or, as Carter (2009) has called for, a more flexible poetics in relation to landscape where evocation of what is absent is in evidence as much as what is represented.

Each of the novels addressed here, *The Drowner* (1996) by Robert Drewe, *That Deadman Dance* (2011) by Kim Scott, *Shallows* (1984) by Tim Winton, *Tourmaline* (1965) by Randolph Stow and *Oyster* (1996) by Janette Turner Hospital, points to a distrust of words, where remembering signifies uncertainty, and the truthfulness of the record within both the officially sanctioned history and personal stories is brought into question. Just as place and memory are in a constant state of flux, never settled, so too the stories that represent them deal in uncertainty and are always open to change. The landscape is marked by stories; they are important because in telling a story a particular place is represented. But which stories does the writer make space for, and which ones does it displace? In my reading, absence and silence imbue the novels, drawing attention to the many voices, stories that are yet to be heard. Nevertheless, I will argue that this lack of certainty need not be a delimiting quality, but rather reading in this way provides a threshold, making space for other voices, other stories.

In the following chapters the analysis provides an opportunity to investigate the authors’ apprehension of place, in particular the Australian landscape, and how this sense of place informs each narrative. It also considers how the characters inhabit the landscape. Are they at home here; emplaced or displaced, settled or unsettled? I am particularly interested in the use of memory and re-remembering, how material was drawn from the historical record, and what that might mean for both personal and collective memorialization within the national identity.

The representations of the Australian landscape that permeate the novels reflect a concern with place, especially at the margins and borders where the colonial agenda plays out. Borders may be arbitrary lines marked on maps but they represent territorial possession and dispossession within that takes into account Indigenous knowledge and experience.
lived experience. Things have happened in these places that are ‘unspeakable’, events that the conventions of historical writing are unable to grasp, that exist only within local memory, and that the novels are well positioned to exploit. I want to consider writing and, in some ways even more importantly, ways of reading, that represent the uncertain and fragmentary nature of place and the memories embedded there.\textsuperscript{5} But even though I cannot dodge the prickly fact that I am writing about place and my story necessarily touches on landscape and memory that is intrinsically connected to the colonial history of Western Australia, I suggest that the work of writers provides a welcoming ground for synthesizing and reconstituting contention and the desire for change that manifests within the cultural milieu, reconciling historicity with present-day experience.

Ashcroft argues that reading Australian culture as postcolonial is more than just a confirmation of the complex colonial past, but allows for an understanding of the “adaptations and transformations by which global modernity has come into being” (2010,1). In the context of postcolonial literature, the diverse subaltern stories that challenge the homogeneity of the dominant narrative, are, as Mishra and Hodge suggest, “an achievement to celebrate, not to minimize or deny” (2005, 382). While the novels delineate a particular view of the postcolonial condition (which I highlight in the titles of each chapter), they each reference a deep concern with the fixity of language in relation to naming and bounding the country, as well as with the vital role of memory, its centrality, unreliability and shiftiness.

Paul Connerton (1989) points out that public institutions in the physical, symbolic and social environment play a significant part in shaping and forming the content of memory, a facility that I argue applies to literature and other creative production with their translating and recording properties. However, cultural artefacts and public monuments, while intended to transmit memory into the future, are subject to the expectations and intentions of the present so that paradoxically, “remembering is a prelude to forgetting” (Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998, 159). I suggest that as well as the capacity to creatively represent places, the novels in the study are a form of discourse that have the capacity to engage with, even shift, other, sometimes dominant discourses, around issues of identity and power relations.

But while my dissertation draws upon the work of other theorists in the area of place and memory, by far the most significant for this research is Casey who consistently claims that place is

\textsuperscript{5} Paul Ricoeur argues that modern civilization demands taking part in scientific, technical and political rationality
“the bedrock of our being-in-the-world” (1996, xvii), and argues for a sense of place that mitigates feelings of dislocation, homesickness and desolation (1993, x). Of particular significance is his view of place as “as a material condition of possibility” (2001, 226), an “undelimited, detotalized expansiveness, resonating regionally throughout the unknown as well as the known universe” (1997, 336), as well as his ideas of the creative potential of ‘boundaries’ and the ‘in-between’ (2007a).

Central to my analysis of the novels is the way that Casey’s work reveals the affiliation of place and memory with imaginative practices. Drawing on his work, I contend that memory is not comprised of fixed mental images or discrete items permanently stored in the individual mind, and that the unstable, unreliable individual memory draws upon external scaffolding or props. While it is possible to remember without any traces in the current external environment where there are no photographs or written documentation, places provide triggers to memory that are accessed and shared collectively through stories.

The novels were selected because each of the writers has unreservedly situated the narrative in their particular representation of the Australian landscape; the setting is crucial to the unfolding of the story. In this respect, the texts offer rich ground for the examination of the praxis of place in Australian writing, set either on the edge of the continent facing outwards, the protagonists looking over the horizon towards a “home” far from Australian shores, or within the “alienating” drylands of the centre in what has been termed the “natural/national uncanny” (Gelder and Jacobs, 1998).

Furthermore, each of the texts provides opportunity to examine Indigenous and non-Indigenous attitudes to place, where social space is contested between the imperatives of mining, agriculture, tourism, and other interests that do not have a commercial orientation. Contemporary responses to environmental management, ecological sustainability and other matters related to how Australians engage with their environment, including a gendered and racial construction of place, brings me into the territory of the contested nature of the terms ‘colonialism’ and ‘postcolonialism’ in what Edward Said (2000) claimed as “imaginative geographies”- the construction of geographical spaces that pay little attention to the geography or inhabitants of a region and more accurately reflect the imagination and preoccupations of the colonizers. In addition, and as Peter Read suggests, “the making of place

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6 To accommodate the alternative and commonly interchangeable meanings applied to these terms, throughout this dissertation I have chosen not to adhere to Casey’s differentiation between ‘boundary’ and ‘border’ that suggests the former is “pliable and porous”, the latter “restrictive and foreclosing” (2007a, 508).

7 As Maurice Halbwachs has argued, “There is no point in seeking where memories are preserved in my brain or in some nook in my mind to which I alone have access: for they are recalled to me externally” (1925/1992, 38).
in Australia has come at the expense of Aboriginal dispossession” (2000, 9), an important consideration in the case studies as each of the novels reference the dislocation of the local Indigenous population and draw attention to their lives lived on the margins.8

My readings of the texts are weighted by the consequences of a colonial inheritance, of what happens when we are displaced either bodily or psychically when places do not meet our expectations, and the accompanying sense of displacement and loss, the disconnection from the place when there is rapid transformation to the places to which we are attached, the places we hold in our memory. The memories projected onto these colonial spaces, and their frequent conflict with Indigenous peoples’ understandings of the past, make them part of the ongoing legacy of colonialism, and because of this, I am particularly interested in the discursive practices that have served the hegemonic interests in the formation of national identity and the way that this heritage is experienced in, and in response to, the demands of the present and is subject to continuous revision and change.9 Fundamental to this dissertation is an analysis and response to the way in which the texts embrace or deny the multiple and co-existing voices that inhabit the Australian landscape and how the stories are formed, akin to the geographic layers, in these representations.

Carter claims that “a fabric of self reinforcing illusions” disengaged colonial settlers from the “authentic” place (1987, xv), and I wonder if these misapprehensions are embedded still in literary representations of the Australian landscape and our relationship with it. How memory is engendered, transmitted and upheld, how each of the novels contribute to an evolving national identity and perception of place in Australia, is an important aspect of my project. Even when the author claims a fictional representation, writing draws upon memory that is either personal and embodied, or from the deep well of collective memories that reside in archival documents, accounts of historians, biographies and life stories, creative representations, as well as everyday story making.

Writing about the past is highly contested, especially where territory has been violently appropriated and people forcibly removed from their land. If they are to do their job well, writers who traverse this fraught territory are bound to breach borders, to enter marginal land that requires openness and sensitivity towards the ‘other’, and in doing so, disrupt and provoke cultural change. Writing a novel is an act of translation as much as it is about unearthing and deciphering, and in the

8 Paulo Arnellino’s (2009) study examines the socio-topographic construction imposed by settlers and how writers of the landscape are led by the ambiguity between the place and its discursive construction.
9 See Ashworth, G.J., B.J. Graham and J.E. Turnbridge (2007) for more on heritage, identity and place.
task of recording, the author contributes to the ongoing consolidation of cultural memory. Each case study examines a specific aspect of the novelist’s representation of place (and its corollaries of belonging and loss), and how a sense of place is implicated in remembering and forgetting.

In Chapter One: 'Breaking Ground', I provide a framework for the theoretical basis of the research. Underlying my dissertation is Casey’s understanding of the interconnected and fluid nature of both place and memory, and the way that memory is anchored in particular places (2013, 71). Also important are his ideas of the healing capacity inherent in retelling stories and that memory is “always in the making” (2007b, 27). It is through the reconstitution of stories that the past is channeled through memories, and experienced in the present, contributing to a sense of belonging and ‘home’. I discuss the way the exegesis responds to questions of belonging and loss that have preoccupied me for many years, and the literature that has assisted this process. In this context of 'wounded' territory, I also draw upon Paul Ricouer’s work on translation, forgiveness and reconciliation, especially around the transformative facility of stories, and his assertion that “[e]ven at the individual level it is through stories revolving around others and around ourselves that we articulate and shape our own temporality” (2004, 6).

In addition, this dissertation is influenced by the work of a number of Australian writers whose detailed accounts of the Australian landscape through an Indigenous perspective reveal the once productive, even lush lands of the continent before European ‘settlement’ and signify a way forward at a time when Australia is facing catastrophic climatic conditions and unprecedented environmental destruction.

Chapter Two: 'Forging the Frontier' is a study of The Drowner by Robert Drewe that considers the principle of ‘terra nullius’ and the way the author employs the tropes of water and gold to represent the colonizing project. The novel demonstrates how from the beginning of Western Australia’s ‘founding’, the superiority of European styled engineering and resource development was exhortative, and the materialist economic model implemented with little regard for the existing landforms and climatic conditions. I am particularly interested in tension between the fluidity of Drewe’s writing and the linearity of the engineered landscape he describes.

Chapter Three: 'Threshold' discusses That Deadman Dance by Kim Scott, taking into account the linguistic and discursive qualities of the novel and how the heteroglossic and polyphonic features allow an opening for other stories, other versions of the first contact between Noongar and
Europeans in the Albany area on the Great Southern Ocean of Western Australia. I consider how Scott’s re-imagining of the setter story provides a template for a new way of writing and reading that emphasises fluidity in interpretation, and an alternative means of experiencing a sense of place.

Chapter Four: 'Legacy' provides an analysis of *Shallows* by Tim Winton. The chapter explores the same geographic territory of Albany, and probes the inheritance of past deeds in the ‘settlement’ of the region, in particular the cost of the colonizing project to the land and its people in terms of resource exploitation. The case study examines discursive power where the uncanny landscape holds memory and the ‘truth’ is elusive— who has the words, whose stories endure?

Chapter Five: 'Drylands' examines *Tourmaline* by Randolph Stow. It turns from the coast to the desert where the European view of the landscape as *terra nullius* and the disruption of Indigenous knowledge and land management are brought into focus. The case study investigates the paradox in Stow’s work; a writer striving for silence, and wordlessness, but with particular attention to how the Australian landscape is distorted through the author’s own lens of unsettling fear and anxiety.

Chapter Six: ‘Deadheart’ discusses *Oyster* by Janette Turner Hospital and the way that the discursive uncertainties in the novel provide openings for multiple voices as well as multiple readings. I consider the absences and silences that Hospital gestures to in the novel, and how the representations of place as apocalyptic and uninhabitable are tempered with references to the longstanding traditions of land management, songs and story making of the Murri people in the area.

In 'Beginnings and Rebeginnings' I conclude with some reflections on the contribution of this thesis to an understanding of the central role of narrative to cultural memory, and the value of multi-layered stories. As Casey reminds us, “There is no creation without place” (Casey 1998,16) While always incomplete, the sense of place provides a threshold for multiple strands of memory and narrative to coincide. It creates a space in which representation is never closed, but continuously opening to the future.
Chapter One: Breaking Ground

I would like there to exist places that are stable, unmoving, intangible, untouched and almost untouchable, unchanging, deep-rooted; places that might be points of reference, of departure, of origin. … Such places don’t exist, and it’s because they don’t exist that space becomes a question, ceases to be self-evident, ceases to be incorporated, ceases to be appropriated. Space is doubt: I have constantly to mark it, to designate it. It’s never mine, never given to me, I have to conquer it.

… Space melts like sand running through one’s fingers. Time bears it away and leaves me only shapeless shreds. (Perec 1997, 90-91)
Stories help orient and invest places with meaning, and reflexively, these places orient the stories novelists tell. But as the essayist and novelist Georges Perec laments, places are not fixed. They are volatile, unreliable and contested, and so too are the stories that represent them. Implicated within story making is the way in which words, and the discourses that are contrived from them, are tied to other discourses in the construction of cultural identity. Contextually placed, stories are part of an ongoing continuum of telling and re-telling. In this regard then, an examination of the way writers locate their stories and manipulate the uncertain and dynamic nature of place (and memory) reveals a great deal about the nature of their endeavors. In this chapter I outline the theoretical basis for the analysis of the novels in the case studies, as well as my novella, 'Windsong'. I discuss the association between place and memory, taking into account their inherent changeability and what this might mean for novelists. In the process, I examine the intrinsic role of narrative in the way place and memory are experienced and represented, and consider both the challenges and possibilities that the unfixed and fluid nature of place presents to the authors.

My research is based on the understanding that representations of personal and collective identity constitute an important element of cultural knowledge and allegiance. Decisions authors make about language and structure, about dominant voices, about absences and silences, inform their narratives, and in turn, these determinations filter through to their readers. The potential of narratives to embrace multiple co-existing voices, multiple co-existing stories, and importantly, multiple and co-existing readings, are important considerations in the context of a thesis that is concerned with wounded places where marginalized groups may face oblivion should their stories not be heard.10

The novels in the study are grounded in the historical context of colonialism and, while not wanting to delimit my discussion to the contested area of ‘postcolonialism’, tropes of locational disjuncture and ruptured stories are intrinsic to each of the narratives. Philip Ethington (2007) writes of “the brutal boundaries of colonial exploitation,” but if, as Casey suggests, the boundary is perceived not as an ending but where human action intensifies, it is not at the centre but in the margins that these matters are played out (2007a, 508). Converging with Casey, my analysis positions the novels as texts that operate at “the boundary as creative edge” (2007a, 508).13 In this way, although the land represented in the novels is a site of wounded dispossession, the permeable

10 I follow Barbara Myerhoff’s (1992, 300-1), view that non-appearance (in image or text) may mean oblivion and Marc Auge’s (2004) notion of “non-places” and oblivion.
13 To accommodate the alternative and commonly interchangeable meanings applied to these terms, throughout this thesis I have not adhered to Casey’s differentiation between ‘boundary’ and ‘border’ that suggests the former is “pliable and porous”, the latter “restrictive and foreclosing” (2007, 508).
nature of the boundaries and the indeterminate in-between spaces allow for multiple voices and stories that, importantly, may facilitate healing and cultural transformation.\textsuperscript{14}

Following Carter (1996), Arthur (2003) and Gibson (2002), I argue that a sense of place is as much about language as its material components. This coincides with Simon Schama’s allusion to landscape, that “[b]efore it can ever be the repose for the senses, landscape is the work of the mind. Its scenery is built up as much from strata of memory as from layers of rock” (1995, 6). It is this relational quality of place and memory that presents infinite possibilities in the construction of an imaginative world frame, and endows literature with a role in reconciling activities of the past, even inspiring renewal in the present.

This dissertation takes Casey’s view that “just as every place is encultured, so every culture is emplaced” (1993, 31). As he points out, “place subtends time”, and is integral to every form of remembrance (2007a, 23). Never in stasis, emplacement is an ongoing process that acculturates whatever it borrows from the body, the environment, everything that constitutes the materiality of everyday things. This mutability of places, and the notion that place is experienced within the parameters of cultural exigency is important to my argument; writing and reading are cultural activities always in connection with other writings and other readings, and those who participate in these activities do not do so in isolation. Casey's argument that “[w]e get into places together. … partake of places in common– reshape them in common” (1993, 31) is resonant with the way that stories are made and read. The cultural construction of place through the stories that are generated, is what allows place to “play the animating, decisive role it plays in our collective lives” (Casey 1993, 31).

Place may be apprehended as a personal experience, but its meaning is found in culturally attributed phenomena and affiliated historical, political and social aspects that are expressed through discourse and language. The meanings we inscribe are primary to how we experience and value particular places.\textsuperscript{15} The naming of places, and the memories and stories we attribute to them, indeed our sense of place, is fundamental to identity, both personal and collective. In this light, I agree with Casey that place “insinuates itself into a collectivity, altering as well as constituting that collectivity”

\textsuperscript{14} See Casey’s (2008) ideas about the edge as “the place of creation” and that when we are undertaking any activity we are ‘in-between’ edges.
\textsuperscript{15} The novels in the case studies reference the use of maps and charts as a means to take possession of the country through the renaming of sea and land, pointing to the Carter’s ideas of spatial conquest and the need for new ways of representing place.
Moreover, these activities are central to the construction of feelings of home and belonging, or conversely, to a sense of displacement and loss. But particularly evident in creative practice is the way that authors are able to represent multiple versions of identity and the possibility of a new cultural dynamic that gestures to the mutability and the uncertainty of place, memory and narrative.

That place is in memory and memory is in place implies a state of movement that is subject to constant change. Casey uses the term “events” to invoke the idea of place, and therefore memory, as an active, ongoing happening. Particularly significant is his claim that “places not only are— they happen. And it is because they happen that they lend themselves so well to narration, whether as history or story” (Casey 1996, 26). This resonates with Doreen Massey’s view that contrary to notions of the fixity of place, the topography of landscape is constantly evolving, and rocks move. In the way that stories are multi-stranded and have the capacity for multiple readings, I am particularly drawn to her description of place as “a meeting place rather than as always already coherent, as open rather than bounded, as an ongoing production rather than a pre-given” (2006 34).

The question of representation is clearly significant, especially with regard to subjectivity and the way that writing, according to Robert J. C. Young, is “now valued as much for its depiction or representative minority experience as for its aesthetic qualities” (1998, 4). Young describes the way that ‘postcolonial’ writing has articulated itself through an “historical sensibility” that is reformed and retrieved through the “creative processes of contemporary writing” (1998, 7). The authors in this dissertation draw upon historical discourses that allude to the dispossession and displacement of the Indigenous people and the prevailing attitudes of the European settlers, but in ways that reveal the personal nature of that history, and its expression within contemporary life.

All writing emplaced on colonized land must in some respects decide whether to embrace or deny issues of dispossession (violent or otherwise), and decide whether to represent voices silenced by events and time, such as those of women or Indigenous peoples. I argue that in this way, the representation of place in literature can play an important role in diversifying collective remembering, and in the formation and re-formation of identities. If place and its counterpart memory are never fixed, a style of writing that allows movement and fluidity, makes space for multiple voices, responds to shadows and silences and acknowledges the fragmentary nature of any representation, is better able to reflect this mutability and discontinuity inherent in both place and memory.
John Keats’s (2008, 277) description of literature’s capacity for “uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason” gestures to its power as an instrument of immense cultural value in the way that it facilitates openings for those aspects of life that are difficult to delineate, quantify or even conceal or erase. In this dissertation, the discursive styles of each of the novels reveal the elusory and ongoing nature of stories. The texts are unsettled and questioning. Characters across all of the novels distrust the validity of the written record, of photographs, even the veracity of their own memory. And in turn, what are the readers being asked to remember, and indeed, to forget?

In “A Place Called Home?” Massey (1994, 164) reminds us that “places have for centuries been … complex locations where numerous different, and frequently conflicting, communities intersected” and intrinsic to this idea are the numerous different, and frequently conflicting stories. I argue that novelists, whether intentionally or not, are engaged in a constant state of interpretation and negotiation in relation to the themes they reference, the tone they take and their response to other discourses around them. That is, all writing and reading is contextualized, as indeed, all writers and readers are never independent of their cultural milieu. In an interview with Anne Brewster, Scott explains that identity is

a fluid and shifting thing, which is not to deny the power of spiritual essences. As a writer, however, it seems to me that my identity is about articulating a position I inhabit at an intersection of histories and peoples, and it is an obligation to speak for those people in my family who history has silenced, and by attempting this to step forward with a heritage largely denied me. (2012, 171)

While not all writers engage in cultural and historical projects in the way that Scott does, there is, as Jeff Malpas asserts, an “intimate connection between person and place” and “good reason to suppose that the human relationship to place is a fundamental structure in … the sort of life that is characteristically human, while also being determining … of human identity” (1999, 13). This interrelationship between place and human identity is important to my research, along with the question of what happens, how identity is formed when the intimate connection with place is fractured, when the fundamental structures that make our lives characteristically human, are lost.

Central to my argument is the idea that literature that fails to recognize the potential for multiple and co-existing voices, multiple and co-existing stories, and importantly, multiple and co-
existing readings, is unable to represent the mutable nature of place and memory. In this respect, Ricoeur’s understanding of story making is useful, especially his view that “narrative concordance masks discordance in its drive for order and unity displacing difference … degenerating into oppressive grand narratives” (2004, 110). I am interested in the way that his work points to the dialectical nature of identity, both of the self, and collectively, and asks why these identities are commonly threatened by difference. In this light, I make a case for writing that in its integration of past and present is able to encompass a quality of fluidity that resists the dominant narrative. Furthermore, as David Kaplan suggests in relation to Ricoeur’s understanding of narrative, writing that is uncertain and responsive “highlights and preserves difference while resisting the temptation to synthesize a new unity” (Kaplan 2003, 1).

This is not to argue that places are not local and particular, that they do not hold explicit features, and that the cultural markings and memories retained within them are insignificant. On the contrary, I argue that the particularities of context and place are intrinsic to memory, and while memory is located with references to the past, it is, by its nature, experienced in the present, triggered by the objects of everyday life. There are frequent references to Michel de Certeau (1984) in the literature I draw upon, especially in his understanding of place as a practiced space, and the manner in which creative production is able to exploit and re-use the traditions, language, symbols, the matter of everyday life, to appropriate and subvert cultural dominance. This is significant in the context of the nation’s postcolonial binaries where the long held traditions of the original inhabitants have been marginalized or extinguished, and germane to my contention that attitudes to land and the representation of place and dislocation bear upon what is remembered and what is forgotten.16

From the very first, the continent and its people were positioned as a terrible ‘other’. My analysis considers how gendered and racialized identities are represented, and what stories might exist within the absences and the silences, fissures that, while not immediately visible, form the rich layers and textural liminality of each novel’s landscape.

Memory has a central role mediating between lived experience and imaginary worlds. Multi-

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16 While Young (1998,5) questions the “over emphasis on migrancy and dislocation” in postcolonial scholarship, I contend this must always be a consideration in writing about land that has been appropriated through colonization. In his groundbreaking work, George Seddon set a template for a different settler relationship that argued for a responsive and sustainable engagement with the environment of Western Australia. Expanding on Carter’s work, Seddon exposes the duplicitous and comparative nature of language, claiming that “‘landscape’ is a way of looking at a terrain: it is a perceptual term, not an objective reality” (1997, 1).
layered, multi-dimensional, conflicting and contesting stories are in constant negotiation within the experience of remembering, or, as I will argue, forgetting.\textsuperscript{17} Remembering relies heavily on information left in the external world; the internal aspects of memory can be seen more as a response to information of certain kinds rather than as encoded and reproduced fixed images. This is an important consideration in the context of Australian literature where the external world is commonly represented through the English language and a European lens. While not easily achieved, I suggest that writers who unearth the traces of other landscapes have the potential to imbue their writing with a multi-layered sense of place that can provide a threshold for the many voices.

The encompassing structure of the novel form facilitates the transmission of multiple representations of identity and voice. In addition, the fictional quality of the novel provides a platform through which necessarily emplaced characters traverse the temporal features of the narrative, moving backwards and forwards in time, inwards and outwards in their perceptions and the articulation of their reality. This is where the mystery and the interest in the novel resides; along with the writer and the reader, the characters of the novel are experiencing the ‘now’ of the writing, and the way memory, though based on time that has past, is experienced in the present.

Even when they have been marginalized, even silenced and unheard within the wider society, the stories of past lives are intrinsic to and linger within “the memorial potency of place” (Casey 1987, 173). Writing about cultural genocide and the destruction of place as the collateral damage of war, the architect Robert Bevan goes so far as to say that “[t]he built environment is merely a prompt, a corporeal reminder of the events involved in its construction, use and destruction” (2006, 15).

This can be said of every place. Human perception is fundamental to our view of a place, and ultimately, human agency fundamental to its continuity or transformation of form. Our ways of seeing and of acting are inextricably linked to the expression of our humanity through language—in the case of place both through the powerful action of naming, and through the locating of stories. Bevan suggests, the naming and claiming of environments is

\textsuperscript{17} Of course, entering the imaginary world-frames of each writer does not mean that the multiple and co-existing voices will be heard.
memories but it is independent of any individual within that group. … we recognize our place in the world by an interaction with the built environment and remembering these experiences, and by being informed by the experiences of others: the creation of social identity in time and place (2006, 15).

Even though they may not do it consciously, novelists work from a point of embodiment, drawing upon reserves of personal, remembered experience. Following Casey’s assertion that embodiment is “the basic stance upon which every experience and its memory depend” (1998, 331), I argue that all human experience must be by its nature embodied and emplaced. Casey delineates two features of recollective space: “clustering”, that describes the tendency of memory to “coagulate around particular points or locales;” and “compression”, “when a number of past locales become telescoped into the single locale of a given mnemonic presentation” (1987, 71-72). These qualities of remembering are strongly implicated in the notion of ‘home’ where a sense of intimacy with particular geographic or built environments, and with the objects and sensory nature of the place evoke a sense of belonging and nostalgia, or as in the case of displacement or erasure, a sense of solastalgia where this once familiar place has undergone such change that it no longer resembles the place that is held within memory.18

In addition to his ideas on narrative agency, I draw on Ricoeur's work to inform my ideas of memory, particularly in relation to recovery and forgiveness where generational identity is constituted through displacement, loss and memory trauma, along with the collective imperative to remember or forget. His work engages with translation, memory work, and reconciliation in order to generate a discursive foundation for an interaction between the identity and alterity of a country and its “strangers”, claiming that “[e]ven at the individual level it is through stories revolving around others and around ourselves that we articulate and shape our own temporality” (1996, 6). An understanding of notions of exile and belonging, how to be at ‘home’ in a world where displacement is endemic and fewer people are living their lives in the place where they were born is central to this thesis, located as it is within Australian literature that necessarily traverses the ‘wounded’ territory of Indigenous dispossession and the continuing ‘settlement’ of migrants from around the globe.19

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18 The term ‘solastalgia’ was coined by Glen Albrecht (2005) from the words ‘solace’ and ‘nostalgia’ and refers to the psychological distress experienced when a beloved place is undergoing rapid change and is no longer able to provide the solace associated with belonging.

19 See UNHCR/The UN Refugee Agency and WHO for reports of both internally displaced people (28.2 million IDP’s in 2012) and even more across border refugees.
There is increasing critical attention to the way that environments are rapidly changing and the nostalgia and longing for the loss of remembered places. Both Yi-Fu Tuan (1974, 1977) and Edward Relph (1976) offer valuable insights into the meaning of home and belonging. Tuan (1974, 152) describes place as “a centre of meaning constructed by experience” and sees home as an intimate place filled with elements that evoke memories (1977). This has important ramifications for identity; to be embodied at ‘home’, to experience a sense of ‘belonging’, or conversely, ‘unbelonging’, means more than the physicality of the body; it includes sensory perception, emotion and thought with place and memory inseparably interlocked.

The essential nature of the novel form is to traverse both interior and exterior landscapes in a fashion that allows the emplaced characters to disclose their human interiority within a framework of remembering and forgetting. In this way, they are able to define and determine their deepest sense of emplacement or displacement, of belonging or loss. While Casey proposes that “to be in the world, to be situated at all, is to be in place” (1993, xv), employing (after Gaston Bachelard) the term ‘topoanalysis’ to consider what it is to be emplaced or even displaced (1993, 3-39), he argues that just as we may feel “at home” in our bodies, or not, so “entire cultures can become profoundly averse to the places they inhabit, feeling atopic and displaced within their own implacement” (1993, 34). In each of the novels this sense of aversion and alienation is embodied in the characters.

While it cannot be claimed that the novels in this dissertation are strictly historical, they do draw upon an historical sensibility of the Australian continent represented in a dichotomous view of the land that is potentially responsive and life-giving, or deficient and of value only in terms of its economic potential. As each of the novels show, within the colonizing view there was a clear purpose of the settlers to exploit the abundant resources of the land, as if, unlike the land they had left, this land did not require the consideration of preservation and sustainable practices.

However, time and place within literature are not bound by the laws of physics or indeed, by any of the restrictive paradigmatic considerations of embodied life. There is liberation in the form of the novel that allows for almost anything: letters, diaries, poems, dreams, exposition, flights of fancy and cold hard facts have unfettered access. And, as the novels I have selected demonstrate, an

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20 Philosophers such as Gaston Bachelard and Martin Heidegger have written extensively about space and its relationship to place, and have influenced Paul Carter, geographers such as Yi-Fu Tuan and Edward Relph, and anthropologists such as Steven Feld and Keith Basso.

21 Casey uses the terms ‘emplacement’ and ‘implacement’ interchangeably (1993, 315).
unlimited cast of characters of all persuasions flaunt themselves, argue, recollect and predict, while the reader negotiates along with them the external loci and internal terrain of the writers’ imaginative world frames.

Nevertheless, there are clear implications for story making where the dominant discourses prevail and the voices of the ‘other’ have been pushed to the margins within the national grand narratives and historical texts. What is to be remembered, and conversely, what is to be discounted, erased and forgotten within the hegemonic power structures when “[d]iscourses are”, as James Gee argues, “inherently ideological and related to the distribution of power/hierarchical structures” (1990, 144)? Words fashion the relationship between people and place. With this in mind, I argue that history is problematic in constructions of identity where public amnesia is privileged and where dissenting voices are marginalized and silenced.

This essential distinction between memory and history is important in the analysis that follows, where authors draw from both the public historical record, and from cultural and personal memory. Narrative is crucial to the practice of memory, and importantly with regard to cultural remembering, in assisting in uncovering concealed memory, or memories that have been forgotten. Barbara Misztal (2003, 10) adopts narrative as a descriptor for sequential organizations of memory and in her investigations of the historical shifts in the way memory is regarded, claims that memory “can be linked to cultural change, seen as associated with the advancement of the means of communication and the transformation of techniques of power” (2003, 22-25).

Within the form of the novel, narrative practices allow the order of the past, present and future to be continuously constituted and calibrated. Each of the case studies addressed here examine the way the authors represent the instability of places over time through the interior worlds of the characters; their acts of remembering and re-remembering, of telling and re-telling.

22 Herodotus saw historie (and the word ‘history’), as the tracking and tracing of past human lives. Gibson draws attention to the etymology of the word ‘tract’ in relation to landscape; “A tract, of course, is something you can read. But let’s not ignore the nuances … a region or area of indefinite extent … an anatomical term for a system of organs” (1993 473). His insight sheds light on the unassailable position of language in the formation of the nation, and its primary role in maintaining the dominant hegemonic structures and narratives that constitute collective and public memory.

23 I suggest an example of this can be seen in the current and sustained push by the Federal Government to rewrite the Australian National Curriculum, privileging stories of the Gallipoli campaign as the nation’s beginnings and denying stories that elucidate colonial and postcolonial violence and dispossession of Indigenous peoples, and marginalize ‘others’ who are not part of the ANZAC mythology.
Novelists have a particular advantage in what Milan Kundera (1988) claims is the novel’s only morality, the capacity of a novel to reveal the interiority of its characters and discover unknown aspects of existence.\(^{24}\) He consistently argues for the inherent usefulness of the novel form with its facility of complexity and continuity expressed in limitless possibilities and ongoing adaptation. Writing at the centre of dislocated history, Kundera points to the value of uncertainty and the way that the novel’s polyphonic facility is able to widen the vision of readers and, through a process of “chronologic displacement,” produce resonances so that no one character in the narrative is in the position to grasp everything. Authors writing at the margins of memory and imagination (as do each of the authors discussed in this thesis), cross thresholds and map new territory to reveal “unknown aspects of existence.”

I am drawn to ask if my own writing practice is attenuated by what Gibson describes in the postcolonial context as “a sublime structuring void organizing all Australian culture” (1992, 65)? My interest is in how writers work within this actuality, avoiding old binaries that discounted virtually anything pertaining to Aboriginal ontology and epistemology, seeking fresh ways that invigorate writing, and offer original ways for Australians to view themselves. I am in accord with a growing body of work that contends that there are collective forms of forgetting and with this in mind, I draw on the work of a range of literary theorists to propose that there is clear evidence of a discursive ‘whitewash’ in the formation of national narratives and the Australian literary canon.

The landscape, both in geographical and climatic terms, and in terms of the attitude through which it is viewed, reveals the ways in which the colonial imperatives are inscribed upon the place inhabited by the characters of each of the novels.\(^{25}\) Even allowing for the subjectivity of the authors, instilled in the representations of landscape is a form of amnesia that Hodge and Mishra argue is a “defining quality of the Australian mind” and the “proper history of that mind … the absence of history” (1991, 14).\(^{26}\)

But history, like all discourses, is in constant flux, and where traces remain, remembering and

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\(^{24}\) See Kundera’s (1988) *The Art of the Novel.*

\(^{25}\) Barbara Bender asserts that in “the contemporary Western world we ‘perceive’ landscapes, we are the point from which the ‘seeing’ occurs” (1993, 1).

\(^{26}\) While *The Dark Side of the Dream* was written two decades ago, it continues to offer a useful framework. This national characteristic of amnesia is interesting to consider in terms of Kathleen Steele’s (2010) suggestion that even though Robert Hughes was writing about the sublimation of the penal history in *The Fatal Shore,* it could also be said that Australians had been trained in the habit of forgetting, and that this could be applied to the way the nation views the ‘problem’ of representing the situation of Indigenous people in its history.
forgetting are the subject of whim and scrutiny. While catchy, L.P. Hartley’s “The past is a foreign country: they do things differently there” (1953, xvi) conjures the past as a place determinate and unchanging, I suggest that it diminishes the notion of the fluvial nature of memory and the narratives that constitute them. Writing about *Benang*, Marion Campbell suggests that the past should not be seen as another country “but as enfolded and toxically effecting present country” (2014, 229-230).

Language and narrative are implicit in every aspect of the colonizing project and continue to shape the nation through the hegemonic ideology, structures and governance that constitute a postcolonial inheritance, as well as through personal testimony, historical accounts and fiction. Imaginative practices enable practitioners to draw together epistemological differences in multiple ways. Writers are in the position “to wrest a few precise scraps from the void as it grows, to leave somewhere a furrow, a trace, a mark or a few signs” (Perec 1997, 92). Amnesia can be corrected and remembering invoked when novelists devise responses to established cartographies that open up new affiliations and alternative readings of the land. Perec suggests that landscape should be approached as a journey of “rediscovery of meaning,” as if “perceiving the earth is a form of writing, a *geography* of which we had forgotten that we ourselves are the authors” (1997, 79; original emphasis). In this way, novelists have everything they need at their disposal; access to their imaginative and memorial reserves and a literary device that permits, even encourages a “rediscovery of meaning.”

In a similar vein, Mark Nuttall’s term “memoriescape” which derived when he was working with the Inuit of north-western Greenland, is a useful reminder that although the written record conceals and misrepresents the many voices, there is an opportunity for an apprehension of the environment “with particular emphasis on places as *remembered* places” (1992, 54; original emphasis). Their fictionalized landscapes and characterizations notwithstanding, I consider the ways in which each of the authors tap into a “memoriescape” to give shape to the historicity of the people emplaced in the locale depicted in the novel. The polysemic nature of landscape means that it is open to alternative readings from multiple viewpoints, “not so much artefact as in a process of construction and reconstruction” (Bender 1993, 3). And it is with this in mind, that the investigation of the novels examines the sense of place and the landscapes revealed in the absences and silences, in the spaces in between.27

27 Like Casey’s (2007a) ideas of the creative potential of porosity of edges and what lies in-between, Margaret Somerville (1999, 78) suggests there is a “space-in-between” that continues to offer opportunities to write from a point of uncertainty.
In the way that Casey describes place as “not entitative … but eventmental, something in process, something unconfinable to a thing” (1997, 337), I suggest that the multi-layered nature of stories, layers that encompass knowledge, morality and the aesthetic aspects of life, enable novels to play a significant role in expanding and diversifying representations of the sense of place and cultural memory. Conversely, writing fiction in contemporary Australia that is not in some way acknowledging and inclusive of colonial history and the powerful influence Aboriginal culture has on Australian cultural life is delimiting, serving as a further ‘whitewash’ while discounting multiple and varied stories that are embedded within the subsoil of the nation. Not only do the novels in the study provide valuable material for examining place and memory, but they make visible ‘double vision’; the characters of these novels who are settler descendents view the Australian environment through a double lens, “aware of two places at the same moment; [and] see in this double vision the colonized landscape and the landscape of origin” (Carter 1992, 7).

Within the five novels analysed here, the depictions of many of the non-Indigenous characters is one of isolation and dread, revealed in their frequently overwhelming anxiety with a ‘hostile’ environment that manifests through their grotesque physicality and signifying names, as well as through their disquiet and displacement. Gerry Turcotte explains that the ‘Gothic’ frequently represents the solitariness of “isolation, entrapment, fear of pursuit and the unknown”, and the experience of characters “trapped in a hostile environment, or pursued by an unspecified or unidentifiable danger. … themes which are endemic in the colonial experience” (1998, 10-11).

Alluding to the ‘uncanny’ commonly represented in Australian literature, Judith Wright underscored the “double aspect” of hope and fear (1965, xii). Gothic representations of the landscape are common in contemporary Australian literature, and in each reading I have taken into account how anxieties of hauntings and spectrality inform the characterisation of people and places within the novels I discuss. Along with its other bequests, colonization leaves behind competing histories, two states. Displaced, educated to forget, dispossessed of their stories, songs and dances is the legacy for all Indigenous people.

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28 I am not implying here that all novels should be ‘about’ these issues, but that representations of place by writers who are not cognizant of this contested space need to be read in this light.
29 I suggest that while the novels cannot be described as ‘gothic’, the themes associated with gothic novels are evident within the texts.
30 Sigmund Freud’s definition of the uncanny references the German roots of the word to illustrate how that which is unheimlich insists as a state on the (subverted) presence and agency of the known, the familiar, the homely (David McLintock, 2003, 123-162).
31 This is not to suggest that cultural practices are not continuing, and that across the nation there are language
In their groundbreaking work about “reading the land,” Krim Benterrak, Stephen Muecke and Paddy Roe argued that place is, “not neutral or passive, it is active and contestable, it is the site of politics” (1984, 11). In view of the contested nature of representation, I consider how writing and embodied practices are able to respond to the multiplicity of voices and provide a threshold to reconfigure and renew identities, both personal and collective if, as Alison Ravenscroft argues, “There is no position in which one can stand and see all; there is no position from which one can know all. Likewise there is no reading practice that enables one to see all there is to see in a text” (2012, 45).

In recent years there has been increased attention to these matters and in relation to pre-colonial knowledge and land management, and Indigenous perspectives of the country expressed through story and symbols in the analysis of the texts, I have drawn on the work of such writers as Marcia Langton (1993), David Mowarlarlai (in Bell, 2009), Bill Gammage (2011) and Bruce Pascoe (2014).

Places carry all kinds of traces, large and small, that convey sometimes deeply conflicted and contested cultural and historical meanings. In the following chapters, I consider the vexed question of who speaks for whom. In this matter I have drawn on the work of Langton who offers up space for the reconsideration of otherness within the Australian context and explains that

Aboriginality arises from the subjective experience of both Aboriginal people and non-Aboriginal people who engage in any intercultural dialogue, whether in actual lived experience or through a mediated experience (Langton, 1993, 31).

Representations, including their imaginative and interpretative components, continuously shape and redefine personal and collective identities. Murri woman, Melissa Lucaschenko, laments the lack of strong Aboriginal characters in Australian creative production, entitling her 2013 Colin Simpson Memorial Lecture “Wanted: Aboriginal characters in control.” Langton (1993) argues that

recovery and maintenance projects, and proliferation of creative productions and life stories by Indigenous writers, filmmakers and performers.

Like many Kimberley Aboriginal people, Roe’s life was shaped by colonial unsettlement and displacement. Despite this, he is recognized now as a senior Nyikina elder in the community. Roe passed away in 2001.

These acknowledgements in no way represent the full extent of my reading which has included many texts of fiction, non-fiction, oral stories and memoir in the area of Indigenous knowledge and experience, particularly in relation to place and memory, and of postcolonial contact. Local commentators have also been helpful with reference to the context of each novel and my own novella.
ethical critique and production by creative artists is possible by non-Aboriginal practitioners, and that the assumption that Aboriginal people are inherently more able to represent being ‘Aboriginal’ is founded on the assumption of an ‘otherness’ that discounts the diversity of cultural, historical, and gendered experience.\textsuperscript{34} As she points out, these binaries are restrictive and difficult areas to negotiate by Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal practitioners alike. Nonetheless, how does a white writer represent Aboriginal characters and cultural knowledge without reinforcing the silencing, the sense of powerlessness for self-expression within Aboriginal communities, and perpetuate the non-Aboriginal hegemonic order to negate, annul and defuse the colonizing project?\textsuperscript{35}

Within the context of my research, Australia is a “wounded place–a deeply injured … obliterated place” (Casey 2004, 40), and I am implicated in a colonial order that privileges non-Indigenous people at the expense of Indigenous people. Accountability is a fundamental ethical concern in my writing, as is the task of readers to respond.\textsuperscript{36} Even so, as Jacqueline Wright explains in her work on navigating ethics around Indigenous knowledge and subjectivities, perhaps it is, “not about getting the representation ‘right’ so much as engaging with the issues of representation as a novelistic device and the ethics and politics of representation” (2008, 3).\textsuperscript{37}

In this way, the unfixed and uncertain nature of place and memory provides space for disruption and discontinuity, but also for renewal of long-held traditions. Just as place is a site of struggle, a “conjunction of many histories and spaces” (Massey 1995, 191), cultures and identities are in a constant state of change, and the way they are represented is an ongoing process of negotiation. Imagination and memory coalesce within stories; writers draw upon their own embodied experience of place, their own memories and the cultural and historical markers that define their landscapes.

Gibson (2013, 247-249) explains the way that memory is a personal embodied experience; “the country holds memories of fluidity” that seep into human consciousness, through the tangible features of the landscape, and through the cultural expressions of the people and the many artefacts,

\textsuperscript{34} Most importantly, the term ‘Aboriginality’ serves to homogenise and elide the representations by diverse social and cultural groups that exist throughout the Australian continent.


\textsuperscript{36} My work has been influenced by Myerhoff’s (1986) ideas about the consequences of invisibility/silencing of marginalized groups and the agency implied in reading.

\textsuperscript{37} This is not to suggest that any one story can facilitate meaningful engagement and ‘right’ action.
whether linguistic or other, that pervade these places. All stories are palimpsestic by nature, and the confidence I have to write at the borders and margins of what is understood as Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal is drawn from many years of personal and professional interest in the ways in which Australians of diverse ethnicities might engage creatively with one another. I agree with Allan Robins’ description of engaging with stories told by Indigenous people, that as

> each story washed into me, it mixed with previous layers of narrative and meaning, settling into a new coalescence, a new set of stories adding new voices to my story of self: and thence to the story that I wanted to tell. (2008, n.p.)

There is no perfect template for a multidisciplinary approach but I take Casey’s (2007b) view that without it, the opportunity to apprehend is narrowed, delimited and incapable of sourcing the richest veins of human knowledge and experience. My intention is to be as interdisciplinary as possible, in a way that is open to multiple strands and multiple voices.38 I am for writing that honours the unsettled and responsive qualities of place and memory, writing that is flexible and provides thresholds for new readings and re-writings. I am drawn to Casey’s discussion of imaginal and memorial margins that are “ways by which the content becomes less than definite, less than particular by degrees and in different modalities, such as one can see with varying sensory modalities” (Casey 2013, 26).

He describes the forms edges [or margins and borders] may take, and in his recent work argues that in the terrain of remembering and imagining, the edge becomes a frontier, an horizon, a limit that leads to somewhere beyond. Where there can be a vagueness, an indeterminacy, it is possible to allow space for multiple and contesting voices that in some way ameliorate against the binary of otherness and can resist the trend towards a discursive hegemony. The important question here is, as Hospital (1993, 57) asks, “Who decides where the borders of the homeland run?”

Representations of place, memory and stories are each and together socially constructed,

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38 The influence of Casey’s work is in part due to his interdisciplinary approach that encompasses the phenomenology of place, memory and imagination as well as exploring ideas of edges, glances and voice. See for
conceptually and therefore linguistically, with clear inference for identity formation. But the determination to marginalize ‘otherness’ has had important ramifications for the management of land in Australia. While frequently forgotten except in its most superficial form, inscribing the land is a practice common to Indigenous Australians, most clearly seen in ceremonial songs and dances, artwork and the extensive songlines that map the country. Discounted, disappearing, these inscriptions signify a sustained knowledge of the landforms and climate that may provide a useful paradigm for living on the Australian continent.

In her important study on the value of stories and their capacity to record past places and contribute to community wellbeing, Laura Cameron (1996) asks us to consider that, whilst many people are aware that global environments are facing unprecedented degradation, a deeper, more important issue is the human capacity to forget a disappeared environment. Casey goes even further suggesting that “we have not only forgotten what it is to remember– and what remembering is – but we have forgotten our forgetting,” which he calls “amnesia of anamnesia: forgetting what it is to forget” (Casey (1987, 1-2). While I argue that places, and the memories that are embedded within them, are in a constant state of change, there can be a disorientating sense of exile and rootlessness in the rapid destruction and loss of the places that are familiar. And while identity too, is a construction that is continuously undergoing a process of transformation, there is evidence that the destruction of an environment that holds intimate and particular memories, does impact negatively upon wellbeing.

Ricoeur points to the predisposition of authorized and imposed “official history” to support the tendency for what is collectively remembered to serve as organizational forgetfulness. Privileging particular subjectivities and cultural perspectives is unjust, and serves the dominant voices politically. But it also significantly narrows the potential for a more informed sense of place and appropriate environmental management, an outcome that is detrimental to everyone. Freed from rhetoric and delimiting oversimplifications, stories, whether fictional or based on real-life experiences, provide opportunities for diverse representations and shared insight. When we are attached to land, and remember events that happened in a particular place, the landscape provides the

example ‘The Edge(s) of Landscape: A Study in Luminology’ (2011).


Again, Albrecht’s pioneering work as an environmental philosopher has brought attention to ‘psychoterratic’ illness and the use of the term ‘solastalgia’ to explain the negative impact on health that is experienced when familiar places are damaged or destroyed. He suggests that rapidity in environmental damage is a determining factor in how the change is experienced.
centre of meaning, its features echoed in the language and stories that represent it. It is not an abstract thing, but rather a place imbued with significance, either personal or collective, that in turn informs the way we see ourselves.

As each of the novels reveals, this is our inheritance. And like borders, distinctions between past, present and future are arbitrary, uncertain and cannot be contained. The sense of place is a complex interconnection between land and identity that shifts through narrative between inner and outer worlds and across subjective demarcations of time so that nothing is ever fully resolved.

In the novels, the authors’ descriptions of the landscapes detail recognizable geographic landforms and features. The characters remember and lament the loss of familiar places through the rapid re-engineering of the landscape– the disappearance of flora, fauna, lakes and rivers that have connected people to their environment, the history and the stories of a place that may easily be forgotten. A sense of place, and all that that implies, requires a certain sort of authenticity, derived from a direct experience of the place. It is fortunate that there is an abiding human need to write and to read stories, for as Cameron argues “one purpose of history is to make people miss what they haven’t experienced and to help them understand where they are” (1996, 94). However, as the authors in the study demonstrate, a sense of place is capricious and elusive– many of the characters that inhabit the novels lament the incapacity of words to capture and confine the uncertainties of their existence. And how can they, words, which are equally changeable, even unreliable, represent these complex and contested matters?

Striving for new structures, the novel is a form of liminality that provides space for the exploration and reconfiguration of ways of seeing. Within its imaginative world-frame there exists the facility to reconstitute possibilities, and to adapt, to orientate, to confer solace through the practice of remembering and re-remembering, making stories from the many views and the many voices, about the places that have been degraded and lost. The connection between places and stories is not unequivocal, or lineal. But places can act as memory devices and, if transmitted through literature, perhaps guard against the risk of our forgetting disappearing environments, or indeed places of significance that have completely gone.

When memory and narrative coalesce, it is possible to discover a trace of past that has long been overlooked, even forgotten. It is through stories, (and I would argue especially stories that embody and are emplaced in ways that we can connect with intimately), that we can gain a sense of
the order and the wholeness of life. We can experience a belonging. Myerhoff (1980) points to the capacity of narrative to strengthen collective identity, and suggests that when we tell stories to ourselves or to others we can transform the world. She contends that

One of the most persistent but elusive ways that people make sense of themselves is to show themselves to themselves through multiple forms: by telling themselves stories; by dramatizing claims in rituals and other collective enactments; by rendering visible actual and desired truths about themselves and the significance of their existence in imaginative and performative productions (Myerhoff 1986, 261).

Making sense of ourselves by telling stories is at the heart of literary ventures, or why else would authors valiantly labour over their task. Casey suggests that getting back into place is the key to our endeavours, that it is “the homecoming that matters most (1993, 314). This is a task that has no limits; it demands an ongoing “journeying between and among places” so that there is no effective end to “how we may continue our ingression into their indefinite future” (Casey 1993, 314). There is nothing certain for these novelists who have placed their words in straight lines upon the page. Shadows haunt the lines. The authors’ words are derived from a tradition that insists past memories and old meanings are reconstituted and reformed, and in turn, will be displaced to make way for future forms. Nevertheless, their world-frames, embodied as they are in particular details and delivered through voices that seem familiar, provide a point of connection to a sense of place that reminds us how much we want to come home.
Chapter Two

Forging The Frontier: *The Drowner* by Robert Drewe

He feels at home in raw, dry places. Places with new people. She didn’t say he wasn’t the only one choosing to escape too-moist and emotional Europe. That the unconscious mind of many an outsider needed to dry out in a fiery male domain. Or even that the Western Australian desert in summer wasn’t a million miles from hellfire. (*The Drowner*, 302)
In Chapter Two I examine two critical perspectives in relation to the sense of place and memory represented in *The Drowner*. Firstly, I consider the idea that implicit in Drewe’s vision of colonial life in Western Australia is the notion of *terra nullius*, and secondly, the way in which the trope of water informs the language and structure of this text. In addition, I discuss the role of discursive practices in constructing and maintaining both personal and collective memory and consider the way in which the author’s narrative structure contributes to remembering and forgetting.

All novelists engage in a process of selection; what to include and what to leave out, closing or opening, reconfiguring, to create new narratives that build on old ones. In an inter-play of remembering and forgetting, the work of novelists (the fictionalizing nature of their project notwithstanding) engages with other discourses, both official and unofficial, and plays its part in the formation of cultural identities and in some cases, national mythmaking.

This chapter is a fitting place to begin my analysis because while *The Drowner* is neither a story of the first explorations of the Australian continent, nor an account of the first contact between Europeans and the Aboriginal inhabitants, the narrative encapsulates the hegemony of the newcomers and their attitude to the alien environment.

Drewe explains that the elements of the narrative coalesced over time. He describes his fascination with the engineer C.Y. O’Connor, an “operatic person who carried water uphill to the goldfields”, and that he wanted to create a story with a character who conveyed European sensibilities but was tired of them, and was seeking a new world (Drewe in Waldren 1996). Throughout his long career, Drewe has written about diverse topics and his oeuvre canvasses, even subverts, many Australian national myths. His background in journalism has provided him with the necessary tools for sourcing and writing about historical and factual material, in this case the period of the Western Australian goldrush of the 1890s. However, as Bruce Bennett suggests, his writing is tempered by the need to balance “the perilous pleasure of pursuing the truth” with the “sober realization that all stories are hints and approximations … only ever partial, mysteries remain” (1991, 63).

I also draw on Ricoeur’s (1996, 6) ideas to argue that in order to generate a discursive foundation for an interaction between the identity and alterity of a country and its “strangers”, novelists who invoke the hegemonic powers of historicity have an obligation to participate in translation and memory work. Emplacement and displacement are embodied in the characters of
Drewe’s novel as they traverse continents and settle in Australia; they are all strangers in this ‘new’ land. With this in mind, I am interested in the way that *The Drowner* makes space for the multiplicity of voices and stories that haunt these places, particularly the goldfields region of Western Australia.

The novel’s protagonist William Dance, claims he is “tired of reacting to long-existing conditions … wants to experience different surfaces, risks and landscapes” (60) but “feels submerged, a hypocritical prisoner of the past” (17). Central to the narrative is the colonists’ agenda to exploit the country’s wealth, while the sense of place, where the story unfolds, is at its heart. The locus of the novel follows the course of the ‘golden pipeline’ that was engineered in the late 1890s to pump water from Mundaring Dam on the Western Australian coast to the Coolgardie/Kalgoorlie goldfields at the edge of the Great Victoria Desert.\(^{42}\)

While the establishment of a colony at King George’s Sound (Albany) was initially precautionary against the increasing interest of the French in settling the continent, and later, the growing numbers of international ships scouring the southern waters in pursuit of whales and seals, the governors of the colony soon ensured that the advancement of the settlement served the interests of investors and speculators.\(^{43}\) The discovery of vast quantities of gold provided the necessary impetus for the naissance of the Western Australian gold rush. Regrettable, however, was the lack of water; in the absence of large reserves of fresh water and low rainfall, accessing water became problematic and expensive.\(^{44}\)

Wetness and dryness is the novel’s terrain. I propose that a reading that apprehends place and memory necessarily considers the way that the poetics of *The Drowner* encompass the quality of fluidity, most clearly expressed through the trope of water, and paradoxically, through the lack of water. The sense of place and the transmission of memory are also revealed in the way many of the characters speak for themselves, articulating and recalibrating the stories of their own past and opening the reading to a range of viewpoints. Shadows and silences haunt the text, and with this in mind, I begin with a discussion of the notion of *terra nullius* and the way that Drewe addresses the Indigenous presence on the goldfields. This leads to a discussion of the trope of water that includes the author’s representation of landscape and gender, as well as the way photographs captured and

\(^{42}\) Ruth A. Morgan’s (2015) essay “Ghosts of the Water Dreamers” provides a useful account of the water histories and what it means for Western Australia’s current water concerns.

\(^{43}\) See L.Marchant, *France Australe* and Manning Clarke’s *History of Australia, Vol 3.*

\(^{44}\) Vera Whittington’s (1988) comprehensive study of the water problem on the goldfields is revealing. At the height of the goldrush, the cost of water far outstripped the cost of alcohol.
signified the prevailing view of the colonizers.

The dispossession of Indigenous people has been a consistent theme in Drewe’s writing. His novel *Savage Crows* (1976), that portrayed the removal of Indigenous people in Tasmania from their lands, was a groundbreaking work. And so, from the outset it has interested me that, despite the large cast of diverse characters, and several references to the traditionally managed water holes (gnamma holes), as well as the way in which the prospectors exploited local knowledge to access water, there is an absence of Indigenous voices in *The Drowner*. I am interested in what the novel has to say about the ‘memoryscape’ of the goldfield’s region, and the way that it resists a conventional view of the hegemonic imperatives of the colonizing agenda in the way that Ricoeur suggests is possible when the tendency for order in the form of the novel can “degenerate” into “oppressive grand narratives” (2004, 110).

While *The Drowner* is a fictionalized account, it is useful to consider Drewe’s success as a journalist and his skill in incorporating the popular literary tropes and material drawn from the historical record into the novel’s representation of this period of Western Australia’s history. The trajectory of the narrative is primarily concerned with the geographical and cultural terrain that was ‘discovered’, ‘named’, ‘engineered’ and ‘inhabited’ through the process of colonization, all pointing to the dominance of the European order– the Indigenous people shadowy and silent. Vera Whittington’s (1988) study, from which Drewe sourced much of the historical material, details a large population of Indigenous people living on the goldfields at the time. During the period he depicts, disruption to the lives of Indigenous people was intense; they were dislocated and marginalized, and, as the novel shows, there were few avenues through which to voice their resistance and be heard.

Very early in the colonizing process there was clear evidence of the destructive nature of European practices, but according to Henry Reynolds (1987), most colonists remained ignorant of Aboriginal cosmology and its importance in Aboriginal societal governance and land-management. During the period in which the novel is set, the Empire was in the thrall of a scientific and technological revolution. “Science became a metaphor for Empire itself, a symbolic expression of

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45 Gnamma holes, natural miniature wells of water-collections of drainage from the catchment of the rocks, had been the source of water for countless generations of Indigenous people and these were the first casualties to water reserves on the goldfields.

46 See Ricoeur’s point that in fiction, characterization is part of the plotting as it defines “narrative identity” and that characters are “recounted at the same time as the story itself” (1996, 6).
what the Empire might become” (Lines, 1991, 154). This alien landscape, the governors and their constituents most commonly believed, required the benefits of modern British agriculture and engineering.47

Reynolds argues that the concept of *terra nullius* was “the single most important feature of the British appropriation of Aboriginal land” (1989, 67).48 As the colonizers spread out through the landscape, their territorial claims were established with the trappings of their authority, the English language, British scientific and technological knowledge, and an unerring belief in their superiority.49 Ontological and epistemological differences between colonizers and Indigenous people were significant and as Stephen Dovers explains

The denial of the previous culture, combined with ignorance and perhaps the hubris of an expanding imperial society, led the colonists to view the country as *terra sine scientia*—land with no knowledge. (1992, 1)

Reynolds sees the settlers’ “firm belief in their own superior culture and power of progress” as expedient to economic interests (1987, 106). The novel exposes the economic agenda of the colonial administrators, but it also reveals the dependence of the European explorers and the settlers, who knew nothing of the geographic and climatic features of the continent, upon the local people, and how this reliance on information about routes, sources of fresh water, and access to food and labour was commonly unacknowledged.50

Land and the sense of place are intrinsic to *The Drowner*, represented as both stark and beautiful in each of the continents the characters inhabit. From the opening sequence, where Will Dance and Angelica Lloyd collide in the warm alkaline waters of a public bath in Bath, the characters are embodied in place— even when they are displaced, even atopic to the environment in

47 There were exceptions—George Grey (1841/1964) learned some Noongar language and George Fletcher Moore’s (1884/1978) diaries reveal the rich culture and sustainable economy enjoyed by the Aboriginal people they met.
48 John Bradsen argues that the term *terra nullius* has been misunderstood; that rather than meaning “a land empty of people” it is more accurately interpreted as meaning “a land empty of law” (2000, 284). This is despite the fact that the Indigenous people had a complex legal system governing all aspects of their lives, adapted to the Australian context (Langton, 1998; Kinnane, 2002).
49 In “Art, wilderness and *terra nullius*” Langton (1996, 11-24) asserts that there is no such thing as a “natural” landscape as they “exist only as representations and constructions” where “nature” and “wilderness” are considered non human. She is, of course, referring to the colonists’ inability to know or, even if they did, (for example in the use of fire in land-management, Langton 1998), to acknowledge how Aboriginal people inhabit and use the land.
50 Reynolds argues that “the concept of racial equality was inconvenient in a society bent on dispossession and a threat to all those individuals and institutions with capital invested in Australia” (1987, 106).
which they find themselves.

Along with Drewe’s reference to the significant role of engineering and technology in the establishment of the colony in Australia, the key trope of water underpins the agency of the narrative. Entwined within the colonizing project, both water and gold played a considerable role in the establishment of the economy. There is something paradoxical, though, in a watery narrative set on the driest continent on earth, a place where rivers do run dry and lakes are most commonly devoid of water.

Implicit in the notion of *terra nullius* is the battle for water, and the novel delves deeply into this major concern in the settler economy. The fiction that Indigenous people wandered about the continent with no connection to place concealed the impact that the appropriation of water resources had upon their ability to maintain their lifestyle. I follow Michael Cathcart’s (2009, 54) idea that before it was a legal concept, *terra nullius* was a state of mind. The settlers frequently described the continent as a place of emptiness and silence, and the lack of large inland reserves of water was a source of great disappointment.

Drewe gestures to this unsettled state of mind through the trope of water. The characters are never fully emplaced on the dry ground of the goldfields, as if preparing to leave, to move on to other places more able to respond to their yearnings. His writing draws on the rich symbolism of water, and its corollary in the context of the goldfields, the absence of water, so that *The Drowner*, as Vanessa Alayrac and Alistair Rolls describe, is a “liquid text” (2002, 154). The quality of water to re-form, shape-shifting as barriers to its fluidity are removed, resonates interestingly with Casey’s ideas around a “local absolute” represented in a fixed idea of place, and the “non-limited locality” of place that, through a constant state of recalibration, allows for memory that springs from and has the capacity to embrace the layered events that have occurred in that place, the place (and memory) never “fully and finally made” but “always in the making” (2007b, 26-27; original emphasis). Like water, the novel “ebbs and flows from the outset” while not “clear whether it is ebbing or flowing” but instead, “it both ebbs and flows simultaneously, its narrative locus twirling on the eddies of the perpetual paradox … a text of change, of movement within stillness and of constant self-contradiction” (Alayrac and Rolls 2002, 154).

The story has its genesis in the watery, green landscapes of England and culminates in a place where water gushes from a pipe onto the arid pindan of the Western Desert. The novel’s title
references the ‘drowners’ who discovered how to govern water on the Wiltshire farmlands in thirteenth century England. When Will Dance, the son of a ‘drowner’ is invited by the famous engineer, O’Connor, to join his team in Western Australia, he seizes the chance to leave the stifling atmosphere of his conventional life for the colonies. In Wiltshire, Will notes the way the drowner ‘controls’ water, training its waywardness to respond to his command. Later, watching the Noongar kids on the Swan River play ‘deadman’s float’, he understands that water requires not only mastery, but surrender (220). In the novel water stands for both renewal and death; Drewe describes the moistness and dryness of the land as human tissue, and the character of the undertaker Felix Locke says, “Water in our blood will be cloud one day” (137). But he also references the “mysterious, maddening effect of the lack of water” (126), and the lethal impact of water-borne typhoid bacteria. Angelica claims “death associated with water is more dream-like than … with land. … The pain of water is infinite”(160).

By the time the narrative reaches Western Australian soil, the sensuous symbols and watery tropes of Bath and the Wiltshire downs, even the immense Victoria Falls where so much happens on the long trip south, are displaced by what is at the heart of the novel– Australia’s preoccupation with the lack of water, both real and imagined. This preoccupation permeates the characters’ thoughts, feelings and actions. The absence of water in the novel, everywhere evident as a concern of the Australian based characters, is what impels this story to its climax. Absence, lack, nothing it seems like the lush, waterlogged continents these migrants have left behind. Nothing like home.

References to Australia as “the driest inhabited continent” continue to inform descriptions of the landscape in the nation’s literature. Indeed, dominant literary tropes about the hot and dry topography, both on the coast and in the centre, frequently stand in place of considered representations of climatic and geographic conditions on the continent. Maps of the climatic regions of Australia show a distinctive pattern of greenery in the higher yearly rainfall areas on the coast and a large brown centre. The ‘red heart’, also referred to as the ‘dead heart’, is frequently

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52 In the context of the Great Victoria Desert, rain comes infrequently, and commonly in a deluge that floods the land. In such downpours, there is no capacity to ‘control’ the water.
53 Australia has the least amount of water in rivers, the lowest run-off and the smallest area of permanent wetlands on earth. Whilst many factors contribute to this, the most significant is the Southern Oscillation that is generated by a major air pressure shift between the Asian and east Pacific regions, known as El Nino. Implicit in references in the literature is that ‘the drought’ is breaking the rules, and that in time the conditions will return to “normal.”
54 The Oxford English Dictionary definition of drought is “the condition or quality of being dry; dryness, aridity, lack of moisture”. About 70% of the Australian land mass is considered arid or semi arid which suggests that rather than being an aberration, ‘drought’ constitutes much of the continent’s environment and is indeed the norm.
Drewe has written that during his visit to Australia, D.H. Lawrence “found a ‘spirit of place’ that evoked metaphysical terror” (2002, 32).\textsuperscript{55} In the same article he makes it clear Lawrence’s Western Australia is not his, but claims “we’re all inheritors of the Myth of Landscape. Unlike other urbanized, relatively new nations, our spiritual consciousness draws almost totally on the elements and our environment” (2002, 27).

Nevertheless, the sense of place in The Drowner, as Drewe (2002, 27) acknowledges is, “either based on, or reacting against attitudes to water and fire held by bush stoics in the nineteenth century” and relies almost solely on this binary between soft, wet, green England and harsh, hard and relentlessly arid Australia.\textsuperscript{56} Drewe employs many symbolic references that point to the characters being situated in foreign places. Will dreams of a “strange coloured bird” that “sings a tremulous melody like a cascade of pure water”. (56) Angelica gifts him a bird brought from the market, “a small bunch of green feathers fluffed the wrong way by the wind” that O’Connor identifies as a Western Australian budgerigar (2, 61).\textsuperscript{57} When Will makes love to Angelica for the first time, he observes black swans on the river that stand out like a “question mark” (58).

Their relationship is manifestly marked by their decision to leave Britain; for a place where swans that should be white are black, where all they have experienced so far is turned upside down, for a “default country” (Arthur 2003). Drewe writes of “a breathing space in the river’s flowing narrative,” and before Will even sets sail, before his feet have touched the ground on which his future is to be lived, we know that the heritage of his forebears, his father’s stories and his own knowledge of ‘drowning’ will be of little consequence in this land where water seems as elusive to

\textsuperscript{55} In the 1923 novel Kangaroo, Lawrence portrays a Western Australia that is filled with a deathly stillness, and nothing. For example, see pages 9-10, the “unnatural West Australian moon…”

\textsuperscript{56} I am not suggesting that The Drowner is unusual; rather argue that this binary is frequently represented in Australian novels.

\textsuperscript{57} While to the Englishman the budgerigar is seen as something pretty and useless, and to Angelica as an oracle, in the Australian context these little birds were used by Indigenous people to locate waterholes and as a valuable aid to ‘reading’ and knowing the country. Despite his overtly racist views of the Indigenous people, the prospector, H.G.B. Mason (1909) also recounts how he observed birds being used in this way and followed the practice himself. Intensive clearing and water pollution had a dramatic impact on the numbers of birds in the settlement areas, though even today large flocks of budgerigars can be seen in the north and eastern regions of Western Australia. Writing about Inez (115) and her reaction to the sustained desert heat, Drewe describes how budgerigars “fell from the sky like balls of green blossoms”– poetic perhaps, but not an apt description of these well-adapted birds.

\textsuperscript{58} In her poem White Swans, Nandi Chinna (2011) remarks on the “inexplicable white” of the six swans carved above the Fremantle Railway Station, “yearly daubings of white paint transform Cygnus atratus into Cynus olor”.

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the colonizers as their capacity to become grounded in this antipodal continent. The young engineer, who has walked his birth country so intimately and so completely that he embodies its points of reference, will be ‘wholly at sea’, until he ‘finds his feet’. As Carter explains

If a landscape is deficient in variegated points of reference, in progressive patterns of light and dark— if it lacks a European visual syntax— then one of two possibilities arises: either the human being must feel wholly at sea; or else he must derive his sense of place, his equilibrium, his sense of progress, from the measure of his own feet. (1996, 63)

Correspondingly, when Will enters Angelica in coitus and attempts to know her inner states, he enters foreign territory where all that has gone before, his experience and his assumptions prove to have little relevance or worth. Not only do the characters cross geographic borders with feelings of dislocation and loss, but Drewe’s landscapes are clearly gendered.

This idea of woman as ‘foreign territory’ imbues Drewe’s representations of the female characters in the novel. The author suggests that “water is feminine: the sun is masculine” (Alayrac and Rolls 2002, 154), and while this binary may be useful in literary representations, in colonial life the role of women was far from idealized ‘feminine’ poetics. The novel’s depiction of females is ambitious and complex, but references to women and landscape throughout the text allude to a gendered landscape that tends towards the land’s “hardness and subsidence, dryness and wetness”, of the terrain as a sensual lover. “In the wind their trunks groan and spasm like a woman coming. … moving in all its moody ambiguities” (191).

Women on the goldfields did play a role in the establishment of domesticity, but they also encountered many other aspects of life and engaged in diverse ways with the place in which they

Will black swans (Cygnus atratus) always be ‘other’ for those Australians whose roots are in Europe?

See Chinna’s (2014) A Walk in the Anthropocene for a compelling example of psychogeography in the context of the Swan River in Western Australia.

Jan Carter points out that in 1890 it was uncommon for the Perth newspaper, the West Australian, to refer to women except in highly selective categories so that the impression was that “they were drunks, prostitutes, vagrants or assailants; flower arrangers, vocalists or brides; house and parlourmaids, governesses or tutors” (1981, 16). See Carter’s Nothing To Spare for a much broader view.

The ‘pioneer myth’ primarily deals with alienation, adaptation and domination over the Australian landscape, that is, place. But it also encompasses discourses of gender, ethnicity and class, being the stories of people, either real or imagined.
found themselves, depending on their class and circumstances. Social and cultural life of the goldfields was well organized and attracted visitors from around the globe, and as Jan Carter (1981) shows, women were far from an homogenous group of wet and watery females. While the letters, diaries and indeed published texts of settler women show that many women rode on horseback, walked long distances through unmapped country, conducted scientific studies, and interacted with local Aboriginal women in thoughtful and appreciative ways, Drewe’s women are oppressed by the place in which they find themselves, unable to connect with the environment.

Angelica and Inez, (and the complicated Axel Boehm) are independent women in that they have careers, and move freely across geographical borders. But despite Inez working competently in appalling conditions as a nurse on the goldfields at the height of the typhoid epidemic, she is seemingly powerless against the disturbing attentions of Axel Boehm, and freed only when the photographer dies. Similarly, Angelica is manipulated by her father, the patriarch who will not release her, until he dies in the reservoir. Will, whose work enables him to shape the land and boasts that engineers “change the order of things” (206), laments the unfathomable nature of women over whom he feels he has no control, especially Angelica who is resistant to his world view. “Of course, an engineer would prefer a nice dry clod of gravelly male dirt,’ Angelica says. ‘Not if he enjoyed a challenge,’ Will replies” (73).

Another significant female in the novel is the photographer, Axel Boehm, who, with her “tall and wiry” stature and her capacity to travel freely and embrace adventures like a man, is ultimately exposed as a woman. Boehm’s deception is discovered after her death and the reason she masquerades as a man for so many years is not spelt out, though we know that for women of the time, there were restrictions on what they were able to do.

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63 The well-known Australian contralto” Miss Ada Crossley, visited Kalgoorlie in 1904 with the even more famous Percy Grainger. Miss Crossley invested astutely in the Coolgardie Syndicate and became very wealthy. Alice Cummins, the first woman to graduate from law at the University of Western Australia, also displayed great business acumen and ran the Kalgoorlie brewery for many decades.
64 See for example, Carter’s remarkable book Nothing To Spare (1981); First In Their Field, edited by Julie Marcus (1993); Ethel Hassel’s My Dusky Friends (1975); the many books of the singular Daisy Bates, Caroline Creahgie’s journals, and many more accounts published or unpublished of settler women in the 1800s.
65 Tacey claims that a “feature of Australian cultural history is the phenomenon of women ‘dressing up’ as men, living as men, and wishing to be seen as male by the society” and that “the political reading of this is that woman, in a male-dominated context, is underprivileged and discriminated against; if she poses as a male these oppressions might be avoided and a new freedom obtained … or that she is responding unconsciously and quite literally to the intensified masculinity of he cultural ethos, that by cross dressing and by crossing the gender border, she is entering more fully into the psychosocial condition of her time” (1995, 52).
In my reading, Drewe’s depiction of a woman masquerading as a man constructing representations of femininity in photographic images is significant, and mischievously points to the way that both women and landscapes were visually represented through a delimiting gendered and racialized lens. This was a period when the Empire embraced science and technology, and photographs were seen as a means of irrefutable recording. I suggest that photography is a device in the novel that points to the efficacy of such tools, along with the subjectivity of the photographer, to homogenise, even erase people from memory, and existence. Drewe says that he is intrigued by photographs, and “that the missing bits … are more interesting and important than the posed bits” (in Ackland 2005, 27). In the novel, the author gestures to the absences and silences that are not fixed by the image, and that within the dominant hegemony, as Boehm declares, “You don’t exist unless I say so” (248).

The agency of Boehm’s images resonates with Casey’s description of the paradox intrinsic to a photograph, and the way that “the least sliver of time– can enter so deeply and quickly into the thick duree of the landscape precisely because of its quickness and slenderness” (2013, 124). The stylised studio photographs described in the novel were common on the goldfields at the time, constituting a constructed and fixed view of the subject being ‘captured’. For Boehm the goldfields’ landscape is as “stark and strange as Mars” (101) and he tells Inez that the success of a photograph is about “how his studio helps to isolate people from their environment (118). Because of their materiality, these images have traction in representations of the historical period, a situation that Drewe’s narrative questions through his evocation of sense of place and the harsh reality of living on the goldfields at the time.

As archival records attest, “the camera’s monocular, unblinking eye” (118), a one-eyed lens, was frequently aimed at Aboriginal people. From the earliest contact in all parts of the continent, artists and then photographers sought to ‘capture’ what they perceived as the nobility or savageness of the local inhabitants. The photographs, though, do testify to the presence of a significant Indigenous population on the goldfields at the time, a point made in the novel through the inclinations of the photographer Boehm. Historically, some of the women whose photographs remain

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66 For example, see Darkest West Australia: A Treatise bearing on the Habits and Customs of the Aborigines and the Solution of “The Native Question.” The photograph entitled “Native Treachery” depicts sixteen Aboriginal people posing for the camera, dressed in European clothing, the women and children lying on blankets, the men standing behind them are holding spears harmlessly pointing to the ground. The photograph “Cannibalism–‘Kitty’(Ready for Cooking)” shows a girl staring cautiously into the camera. She is enveloped in a white sheet, although her torso is naked and two ritually marked scars are visible. The book is still reprinted and sold in local
in the archive were drawn from across Australia to the ‘Golden West’ during the period 1887-1900 to work with the Methodist Sisters of the People and other church groups. The typhoid fever epidemic, also graphically portrayed in the novel, was ineluctably connected to the shortage of water on the goldfields. Drewe based Boehm’s photographs of Inez on those taken of the nursing sisters; the novel drawing attention to a constructed view of the past and the way that the ‘memories’ encapsulated in the images have come to represent ‘history’ within the goldfield’s historical discourses. Both in life and in The Drowner, the genteel photographs of the nurses belie the physical effort their work entailed, the filth, heat, even the smell of their surroundings.  

Throughout The Drowner, the life giving properties of water are frequently subverted by the trope of death, signifying the ongoing cycle of renewal inherent in all aspects of life. From 1892-1900, Western Australia had the highest mortality rate for typhoid fever in Australia (Whittington 1998, 9) and Drewe’s depiction of the typhoid epidemic and the novel’s preoccupation with the dead brings to life a significant, though often forgotten, aspect of our history.  

Despite best efforts at the time, little was known of typhoid management. As Dr Malebranche repeatedly suggests in the novel, there was little ability to cure patients, or even prevent the spread of the disease. Young, old, educated, male or female, priest or prospector: all were at risk– dying from typhoid fever, or, just as easily, from gold fever when food and water supplies ran out. Dr Malebranche tells the undertaker that “suicides are increasing,” to which Felix Locke responds, “I don’t see as many drownings as I did in Connecticut” (97). Death gives work to the people in the community. Dr Malebranche and the nurses tend the sick, Axel Boehm arranges the hands of the deceased in preparation for final photographs and Felix Locke organises their burial. Mahomet Mahomet, an Afghan who, because of his beliefs has a calm demeanour towards death, assists the undertaker in some of the more gruelling pick-ups (93). The priests are needed for the final rites.  

The novel references the toll on the people and the environment that resulted from the lack of water and the fatalistic approach taken by some; typhoid and other diseases as well as suicide were
endemic. Whittington records how the editor of the local newspaper angrily asserted, “Typhoid is not the will of Providence. When men refuse to recognize common rules of health and cleanliness… and endanger lives of wives and family, to lay the consequences to Providence is unjust” (1989, 42). Providence though, as I understand it, is not just a belief in the benevolence of God. It can also mean “good judgment and foresight in the management of affairs or resources”, something that many of the settlers commonly failed to do in their inability to ‘read’ the landscape or take instruction from the local Indigenous people who had been doing it for thousands of years. In ‘The Golden West’, gold fever was as virulent and difficult to manage as the typhoid epidemic.

As well as photographic imagery, the novel makes frequent allusions to theatrical production as a voice of the colonial administration and in the formation of historicity and collective memory. Dunstone (2009) charts the importance of dramaturgy and the theatre in colonial life in Western Australia, and argues that the dominant tropes reinforced the ruling authority, leaving no space for marginalized groups to have a voice, or have any discernible means to be accounted for, or an influence in the society. It is Drewe’s depiction of Angelica’s abusive father, the awful Lloyd Hammond that draws attention to the facility of stories and the means to disseminate them as powerful agents of the dominant discourses. Ham represents the most terrible characteristics of colonial patriarchy – arrogance, misogyny, self-interest and greed. His experience of the antipodean landscape is of judgemental dislocation, with an unstoppable sense of entitlement. At the novel’s conclusion he sees that only by dying can he find a place in the new order.

The colonial lens, weighted, distorted by preconception and judgment emblematic of the British Empire, pervades The Drowner, so that we are traveling with the young couple, Angelica and Will, viewing the landscape before them through their virginal and English eyes. But it is through their misconceptions and anxieties that Drewe draws attention to the land, and to the way that the successful occupation of the country by Indigenous people before ‘gold fever’ swept across the literature. See Carter (1981) and Whittington (1988).

71 Not only was Providence held to account for the typhoid epidemic but “Providence had designed (for His own purposes, no doubt)”, conceded Premier John Forrest, “that the principal goldfields of the Australian continent should be placed in a district where water was scarce” (cited Lines, 1991, 146/38).

72 Cathcart identifies a trope that valorises and embraces death within the Australian imaginary. He calls it “necronationalism” and claims that it plays a part in the popularity of the ANZAC myth (2009, 154-165).

73 The term ‘water famine’ reveals much of the settlers’ ignorance of the machinations of the local climate and environmental conditions. This lack of understanding of rainfall patterns, mismanagement of the existing water supplies, over population (including the many horses, camels and bullocks of the teamsters that had to be watered), rapid clearing of vegetation leading to vast dust storms, and the lack of sanitation and hygiene led to years of deprivation and retreat from the area.
region was marginalized and discounted by those seeking gold.

Drewe’s matter of fact description of the common practice of offering bribes of “whisky, or tobacco, or trousers to find water”, or forcing Aboriginal people by tying “them to trees in the sun and feeding them salt meat until their thirst forced them to lead them to their tribal waterholes in the remote granite outcrops”, is chilling (124). He positions the telling of this between a description of the squalid conditions in which the miners lived, and a comment that the miners or their animals would foul these precious water resources that had been sustained and utilized by the Aboriginal people of the region for so long.74

With the fever for wealth came an explosion in population, and the tree fellers, the engineers, the railway lines and the thirsty animals that would rapidly and destructively transform the terrain, that was to “institute one system of memorialisation at the expense of another. It was as if the colonists set out to erase the common ground where communication with the “Natives” might have occurred” (Carter, 1996, 6).

Again, Casey’s “topology of the remembered”, in which memory is embedded and embodied in place, and place emplaces itself in memory both personally and collectively, is helpful in examining what Drewe has drawn on for his account of settler history in Western Australia, and in particular the goldfields. The author’s decision to figure recognizable historical names, events and landmarks invites a reading that is framed within historical understandings. Michael Ackland claims that Drewe’s “investment in the past and history is much commented on but not always understood” and that “there are discernible continuities in his writing, as well as attitudes towards history that cause him profound misgivings” (2006, 102).

I contend that although The Drowner is positioned within an historical framework, and that implicit in that is the notion of officially sanctioned ‘truths’, the novel, with its inherent capabilities of form, has the capacity to represent what is absent, discounted or hidden. Drewe provides an opening for the voices that cannot be heard, and breaches the gap in the representation of events that is on the official record. Even so, this matter of remembering and forgetting is a complex process, and as Gibson explains.

74 Drewe inserts a story here, of how the Aborigines responded to this degradation of their water supply Although there is humour and good will in their banter, it does remind the reader that spearings were a matter of life and death, and often in retaliation for abuse and cruelty at the hands of European settlers (124).
Whatever colonialism was and is, it has made this place *unsettled* and *unsettling*. Between the physical geography and the ‘cultural’ settings that get created in imaginative tale-telling and picture-making, there always lies a landscape—a place where nature and culture contend and combine in history. (2002, 2; my emphasis)

As Drewe skilfully shows, people came from the US, Britain, and other parts of Europe to a geographical terrain that was completely alien, bringing with them their own sensibilities, their varying mental states and abilities in order to adapt and survive—or perish.\(^{75}\) And through this lens they saw a “default country” that with engineering and landscaping could generate great wealth. In the novel, O’Connor admires how “the breakwaters he’d built had altered the configuration of the coastline here, changed the surf, dictated how the tides behaved. Regardless of the wind or the moon, the waves were now smaller …” (273). And Will is proud of how within twelve months a gigantic granite boulder that obstructed the progress of the goldfields pipeline was drilled to “rubble and chips no bigger than house bricks” (188). In 1901, the government proudly proclaimed:

> Today there are large townships, busy hives of industry, possessing electric light, railway facilities, and immense industrial undertakings, where but a few years ago even the blacks could scarcely live, and where the kangaroo and the emu made a very poor existence. (cited Lines 1991, 144)

What occurred on the goldfields was encouraged by the colonial administration, the prospectors and settlers armed with guns, machines, and an inviolable belief of the superiority of the British Empire. Many saw colonization as a process of conquest: “The natural world was to be dominated and tamed, made to do our will” (Duxbury, 2007).\(^{76}\) It was also an economic resource, untapped it seemed and waiting to be exploited with the mechanical tools of engineering and technology. The capital of wealthy investors was at the forefront of the expansion of the goldfields.\(^{77}\) In *The Drowner* (249), the undertaker, Felix Locke, was expected to gather up the corpses of the typhoid epidemic late at night to avoid disturbing the optimism and goodwill of the London

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\(^{75}\) After a slow start, the peak years of immigration to Western Australia were from 1895 to 1897 (Crowley, 1959, 61). Because of the rich deposits of gold at Coolgardie and Kalgoorlie, the population increased from 48,000 in December 1890 to nearly 294,000 in 1901, with a devastating effect on the natural environment.

\(^{76}\) May Vivienne waxes lyrical at “the rumble and stamping of batteries, the hum of the mighty machines, the beautiful bright engines that seem to work with perpetual motion, the enormous furnaces, the magnificent cyanide plant, with its wonderful machinery for extracting gold, the electricity that seems to fill the air and almost take one’s breath away …” (*Travels in Western Australia*, 1902).

\(^{77}\) Gold attracted much of the capital but during the decade to 1900 the value of timber exports increased more than
investors.

It is no accident that the novel climaxes as the reservoir on Mt Charlotte is filling with water piped from the coast, a place that signifies one of the colony’s finest achievements. At the same time as Angelica rids herself of the patriarch when he drowns in the hard won water of the reservoir, the colony is setting a course for expanding development and demonstrating its ability to stand on its own two feet free from economic dependence on Britain. That the real life O’Connor died amidst unsubstantiated rumour and acrimonious attacks by the local media, suiciding months before the water reached the goldfields, only serves to reinforce the mythical status the story of water arriving in the goldfields has in Western Australia’s history.

The entrepreneurial Premier John Forrest promoted the view that everyone shared a common purpose in overcoming nature in Australia. “The object” of the construction of the pipeline and the reservoirs at each end … “was to subdue the wilderness, overcome the obstacles which Nature had placed in [our] way, and run a river of water into the [arid] districts” (cited Lines, 1991, 146).78 Drewe draws on this imperative in the novel, skillfully incorporating into the drama how persuasively O’Connor exemplified, as Lines puts it, “the dominant influence engineers and the controllers of technology would exert over future Western Australian governments” (1991, 146).79

Unfortunately for all concerned, and most especially the Indigenous people of the region, population influxes generated by the gold rushes exacerbated environmental decline (Duxbury, 2007, 54). And while The Drowner depicts the innovative engineering, efficiency and courage of those involved in the project, it also alludes to the “extent of land and water degradation” that was hastened by the introduction of new technology “such as railways, improved steam engines, and particularly by machinery such as tractors and bulldozers” Duxbury, 2007, 55).

But even though the novel denotes the environmental changes wrought on the land, and the cost in terms of human life, it is primarily a work of optimism. Bennett suggests that

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78 Morgan points out that Forrest referred to Isaiah (33:19) – “They made a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert” (2015, 182).

79 According to Duxbury “Boom and bust cycles have typified the Australian economy since early settlement, due to economic reliance on exploitation of natural resources. This is evident in the history of use-to-depletion of whales, seals, sandalwood, timber, gold, and, over a longer period, of soil resources” (2007, 54).
The contained worlds of Drewe’s characters continually split open to reveal further worlds of energy and dislocation. In another writer’s hands, this vision might lead to a poetry of dissolution or despair. But Drewe’s work is more buoyant than this. In the face of blighted hopes, failed or failing relationships, injury and injustice, the reader is continually confronted by an inquisitive, curious, unresting intelligence in search of ‘true stories’, which insists on interrogating not just *what* happens but how and why. (1991, 63)

In *The Drowner*, Drewe has crafted an imaginative world-frame with water at its heart, and a cast of troubled characters who embody facets of the colony’s past and what must surely be its future. The author demonstrates his capacity to build on factual information and historical documentation, and skilfully assimilate it into the characterizations, resisting the conventional tellings insofar as his European characters explore and express their desires, conflicts and resistance while constantly reminding us that this is undeniably a fictional representation. While the trope of the ‘manly’ explorer and ‘expert’ engineer in conquest with the land signifies strongly in the narrative, Drewe illustrates the reflective nature of memory and imaginative thinking as a tool to come to terms with our colonial inheritance. At the conclusion of the novel, Will and Angelica are reconciled with their place, they had “long since shrugged off their heavy and confining clothes … treading water … holding each other up … they could be patient” with the ‘new’ continent (326). And they are, of course, supported in this by the cooling quality of water.
Chapter Three

Threshold: That Deadman Dance by Kim Scott

Borders are not lines but spaces - territories that are contested and fought over, but shared spaces nonetheless. … Some forms of occupation (colonialism, for instance) can generate a mode of resistance that may enhance survival. In a more cultural dynamic, the negotiation of borders can be a model for interpretation. ... Practices of occupation, resistance, and interpretation - are all forms of negotiation.

(Bennett 2008, 10)
In this chapter I examine *That Dead Man Dance* by Kim Scott and consider the author’s capacity to evoke a sense of place. I focus specifically on the ways in which he makes use of language and the structure of the novel to present a re-imagining of the ‘foundation event’. In addition, I explore the text as a site of resistance.

Written in both Noongar and English predominantly from the point of view of a Noongar man, Bobby Wabalanginy, the novel makes space for diverse voices and world views. Through the relationships, even friendships of the Minang Noongar and the European settlers, Scott proposes an alternative paradigm for our interaction with the environment and with one another. In a skilfully constructed narrative that counters customary accounts, the author articulates his knowledge of both the landscape and the cultural heritage of the Great Southern in Western Australia where the novel is set.  

In the novel, that other consummate storyteller, Bobby Wabalanginy, explains the way

you can dive deep into a book and not know just how deep until you return gasping to the surface, and are surprised at yourself, your new and so very sensitive skin. As if you’re someone else altogether, some new self trying on the words. (86)

Bobby Wabalanginy knows the power of the printed word: the eager child forming his letters on the slate; the young man manipulating the truth with writing when he realises that his oblique statement to the governor will free him from the gaol; the old man remembering, reflecting on how the lives of the Minang Noongar have been controlled through the dissemination of the written word. Indeed Bobby strives for the agency, and for what he sees as the permanence of writing, acknowledging its exceptional power in a colonial regime that places little value on the spoken word and the long standing oral traditions of the Indigenous inhabitants.

In that time of transition during the first encounters between the Minang Noongar and Europeans, “laughing and loved, Bobby Wabalanginy never learned fear; not until he was pretty well a grown man did he ever even know it” (67). Bobby willingly embraces new experiences. He is

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80 Striving for a provocative style that resists hegemonic discursive practices has been an enduring theme in Scott’s work. See for example, “Disputed Territory”, where he discusses issues of the representation of Aboriginal people and the “deceits and dangers of ‘paper talk’” (Scott 2000, 164).
81 Various forms of spelling have been applied to the term *Noongar*. I have adopted this spelling in line with other writings of Kim Scott. According to Scott, at the time when *That Deadman Dance* was set, the term *Noongar* was not in use. Similarly, I use the spelling Menang although Menang is also used.
82 Campbell (2014, 235) draws attention to “whiteness”/ like the blank paper. Etymologically “blankness” is literally “whiteness”. Implicit in Scott’s decision to represent a multiplicity of co-existing voices is a resistance of
particularly drawn to the English language and to writing, and

came to need the feel of all those small and intricate movements required to build up a
picture, a story, a permanence. Came to need the ritual of it, the absorption in the
doing of things, and then stepping back – oh look what had been brought forth. It was
like you froze things, froze the fluid shift and shaping, held it. Like cold time.
_Nyitiny_. Like a seed in cold time, and when the sun came out the waters rose. (201)

Scott’s novel stands as something remarkable in the body of Australian literature not only
because it is a “shifty, snaking narrative” that energises and disorientates and demands to be read and
reread, but also because the form revivifies our view of the ‘foundation event’. 83 Scott’s willingness
to reveal uncertainties in the representation of colonially determined identities can be unsettling. In
this way, his purpose presents rich opportunities for those with an interest in challenging and
resisting dominant Australian national discourses in literature that deny multiple and coexisting
voices. In his hands, the story of the relationships between the Minang Noongar and the sailors,
sealers and settlers who made contact on the shores of what is now Albany at the beginning of the
19th century, is complex and nuanced, liberating the novel from conventional dichotomies that
positioned British knowledge (including land management) as superior to that of the Indigenous
people who resided there. 84

The sense of place is intrinsic to _That Deadman Dance_ and in this chapter I draw on Casey’s
argument about place as something that, “subtends every kind of time, thus every kind of memory:
individual and social, collective and public” (2007b, 16). I apply Casey’s idea that places “secure
memories” and ground and gather social as well as collective memories” (Casey 2007b, 19). While I
contend that the recognition of place not only facilitates but actively induces remembering, I also
argue that the affinity between place and memory is selective and negotiated, and always subjective.
The act of remembering is dynamic, frequently functioning to reduce dissonance in the here and
now. In other words, memory can be seen a series of resonances that can adjust to the particular
milieu rather than as the reproduction of determinate experiences (Casey 1987).

83 The character Harley’s comment in Scott’s novel, _Benang_ (24) is apt here. Scott’s stylistic strategies in _That Deadman Dance_ suggest that a unified and coherent style does not allow for a multiplicity of voices. His writing points to the fluidity of identity and what Mikhail Bakhtin (1981, 7) calls the “open ended present”. See also Walter Ong (2002) for his ideas of “residual orality” and the valuable way that this informs cultural expression.

84 I also use the name King George’s Sound. In the archives the place is referred to as ‘Frederickstown’, ‘King
Drawing on Ricoeur’s (2004) theorisation of identity as formed through narration, (either fictional or not), I argue that story making facilitates understanding through its inherent memory work, interpretation and assimilation of meaning. While remembering is experienced internally, it frequently relies on triggers in the external world. Of course the representation of place in the pages of a novel is wholly different to embodied emplacement. Nevertheless, writing about landscape is an act of translation and the imaginative act of reading allows for a multitude of memories, and, as in this case of That Deadman Dance, provides opportunities for reconfiguring a previously held view.85

As Casey (2007b, 17) explains, memory is comprised both of private feeling and thought, and constitutive of identities of all kinds, these inner and outer parts linked by words. Although we are familiar with the solid construction of public memorials where the “perduriness of the construction itself acts to cement the strong bond between past and future … memory does not require ‘the density of stone to mark and re-mark it’” (Casey, 2007b, 2).

Firstly, I will examine representations of the ‘foundation event’ in Australian literature, and the ways in which the notion of a ‘foundation event’ can itself be seen as the site of an ongoing discursive regime of colonialism. According to Gibson the suppression and denial of alternative, potentially resistant voices has served, and continues to serve to legitimise European settlement (2002, 150).86 This includes the denial of the violence that went hand in hand with the land grab, the denial of which Gibson argues has become a national characteristic. That Deadman Dance is located in the contested territory of the Indigenous peoples’ first contact with European invasion, a time in the nation’s history that is typically represented from the colonizers’ point of view. Although the novel is set historically, I contend that Scott’s considered use of language and discursive devices that point to the elision of Noongar knowledge and the silencing of Noongar voices, grants the novel contemporary relevance.

Secondly, I discuss Carter’s (1996) assertion that spatial history (rather than geography) “begins and ends in language”.87 On so many levels, language and the articulation of place is at the core of That Deadman Dance. How the world is organised and classified is fundamental to

George’s Sound’ and ‘King George Town’.

85 Campbell’s work points to the value of textual innovation and suggests that in Scott’s writing “reconfiguring the past as multi-stranded makes agency in the present seem thinkable” (2014).

86 Drawing on Ricoeur’s work, Kearney argues that concordant narratives that strive for order at the expense of alterity “can degenerate into oppressive grand narratives” (2004, 110), a situation expressed daily in the dominant nationalizing discourses.

87 Carter declares that there was an “overwhelming need to clear away doubt- not to make the land speak in accents all its own, but to silence the whispers, the inexplicable earth and sky tremors which always seemed to accompany
knowledge and linguistic systems and, as Watson and Chambers suggest in their work with Indigenous communities in northern Australia, “taxonomic models of the natural world are built into the languages of humankind. Classifications of one may appear absurd to the speaker of another language” (1989, 18). In this way, for example, the elder Menak, a character in That Deadman Dance signifying traditional Minang Noongar perspectives and what will be lost, and who predicts what is to come, is not just resisting a list of European naming, but an entire worldview of the relational nature of reality.

I consider Scott’s evocation of place, and argue that the heteroglossic and multi-stranded approach of That Deadman Dance signifies an act of literary resistance. The novel reminds us of the stories of colonial unsettlement that remain untold, and nourishes the nation’s collective memory with re-imagined possibilities. Furthermore, it touches on what Basso has conceptualised when he explains that “wisdom sits in places” (1996, 105-49). The ability to ‘read’ the local landscape (as the Minang Noongar) and relay through narratives detailing the ‘right conduct’ traditionally associated with these familiar landscapes, presents lessons of how to act appropriately now and into the future.

The creative production of a successful work of fiction, in this case a novel, comprises a nexus of complexity and nuance that enables the reader to become an inhabitant of or to gain some insight into an imaginative world-frame that seems both familiar and original, believable and yet often unknowable. Scott’s ability to evoke a sense of place, along with his skill at writing in both Noongar and English, endows the novel with authenticity, situating the narrative in a place that the reader can perhaps recognize, but sees now as if with fresh, unveiled eyes. The “memories within” are the subsoil of Scott’s work; social and collective memories gleaned from shared kinship and shared history, both in his personal life but also in his active work in language retrieval and cultural maintenance with his collaborators from within the Noongar community.

An important aspect of his writing is that the characters in the novel cannot be put neatly into colonization” (1996, 9).

It is difficult to use the word ‘settlement’ without acknowledging the contradictions, ethnocentricity and underlying displacement of original inhabitants that it implies. Noongar nations were settled across all areas of the south-west of the continent until they were unsettled by the appropriation of their land by European settlers.

Forms of protocol are an essential feature of the way Indigenous Australians manage land, and an important component of the stories valued in these communities. Casey contends that “retelling narratives of good conduct” that are associated with familiar landscapes offers the society much needed models for right action (2007b, 25).

In “Wild Tongues: Affirming Identities” Toni Morrison (1990) describes how as a novelist the “memories within” are the “subsoil of her work.” Scott describes travelling on country during the 2006 Wirlomin workshops to “feel for the pulse of an old land” (2015, 211).
camps of ‘white’ or ‘black’, ‘open’ or ‘resistant’, ‘good’ or ‘evil’. Individually they struggle with the challenges of their cross-cultural encounter, each ineluctably changed by the place. The place too is changed by the perpetual geographical shifts and climatic forces, and now more rapidly under the duress of increased populations of people and the plants and animals they brought with them.\textsuperscript{91}

\textit{That Deadman Dance} speaks to us through the voice of the Indigenous and European characters. Surprisingly few literary representations of those first encounters have represented perspectives of both colonizer and colonized, and Noongar perspectives even less so, despite the population of the Noongar nation being the largest in Australia.\textsuperscript{92}

As a writer of the Wirlomin Noongar nation closely involved in the local language retrieval project, but also in the way that he has considered himself “linguistically displaced” (2011, 1), Scott has both the capacity and the authority to offer a story of the ‘foundation event’ through the voice of Noongar and settler characters. Although written in English, the novel portrays the ability of the multilingual Noongar characters to code switch between English, French and their mother tongue.\textsuperscript{93}

And while the landscape is being renamed by the European ‘discoverers’, the Noongar characters are always emplaced within their own country, the names of the landmarks, the seasonal shifts and plants and animals tracing their longstanding knowledge and history in the area.\textsuperscript{94}

\textit{That Deadman Dance} encompasses a period of 1826-1844, drawing from archival material, oral material of local Noongar, and family sources. Albany, or King George’s Sound, where the novel is set, is the country of the Minang Noongar. On Christmas Day in 1826, a military base was established at Frederickstown by a British Army expedition led by Major Edmund Lockyer, who came ashore with a few soldiers and convicts from the brig \textit{Amity}. In the decades before this, there were encounters between the local Noongar and with seafaring explorers such as Mathew Flinders.

\textsuperscript{91} The expropriation of Noongar property, language and rights was inextricably linked with the introduction of non-sustainable practices in all areas of agriculture and industry, and the resulting degradation of the land.

\textsuperscript{92} In the Noongar Dialogue Report 2010 the population was estimated at 27,000, the largest indigenous group in Australia.

\textsuperscript{93} Henry Lawson worked in Albany in 1889-90 when he met a ‘blackfellow’ who, having spent two years on a whaling vessel, spoke fluent French. Lawson revisited on his honeymoon in 1899 and his feature “The Golden Nineties” was published in the Sydney newspaper, \textit{Australian Star}. Despite the seaman’s competence, in the article Lawson scoffs: “Fancy King Billy as a Jack Tar—two years before the mast!” A version of “Jack Tar” is referenced in Scott’s novel.

\textsuperscript{94} There are six seasons on the Noongar calendar. But, as Arthur argues, “colonial knowing begins with unknowing, by denying indigenous knowledge, so that it was possible to construct the place as an ‘unknown’ space, rather than one that needed to be learnt or to become the subject of narration” (2003, 54; original emphasis).
and Nicholas Baudin, and an ongoing presence of American whaling fleets. However, while the presence of the whalers and their impact on the Minang Noongar people is referenced, the novel is essentially concerned with the period of the founding and settlement of a colony by the British. Although Scott has reworked and reconfigured the material, there are clear resonances in the novel with the local geography, historical record and mythology of the region.

Unlike other accounts, *That Deadman Dance* positions the reader squarely in the Noongar camp. Despite the dominant literary tropes representing the contact period as one of conflict and a lack of cooperation between settlers and Aborigines, and notwithstanding the complexity and diversity within every encounter (Shellam, 2009), there is evidence within historical documents of the time that Scott’s representation, which suggests, at least to some extent, a friendly and cooperative relationship between the Noongar and the British, can claim to be credible.

*That Deadman Dance* can be read as a cultural monument that asserts, and indeed affirms a sense of remembrance and belonging frequently absent in everyday life. As Tom Stannage suggests, the works of historians and novelists both “probe the individual and collective memory of a people, and if competent, assist that community to answer questions of the past” (1981, xv). Disruption and dispossession of cultural knowledge, including stories, songs and dances, is a legacy of all Indigenous people, and remembering, reclaiming the words an important aspect of survival. Embodied practices such as walking on country (as Scott does as part of the Wirlomin Noongar Language and Stories Project), and story making that responds to the multiplicity of voices, provide a threshold to reconfigure and renew identities, both personal and collective.

Scott has constructed the imaginative world-frame of *That Deadman Dance* to be believable; the landscape particularized, the language localized, the historical elements based on archival record. The narrative explicates the ‘foundation event’ in vivid detail so that the novel is a skilful re-imagining of the relationships within the encounter. The author argues that continuity of place

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95 Historian Inga Clendinnen’s 1999 Boyer lecture “Incident on a Beach” provides an interesting discussion of Baudin’s activities at Albany.
96 While unlike Scott’s writing, Amanda Curtin’s novel *The Sinkings* (2008) similarly unearths a story within the layers of Albany’s colonial history.
97 Scott has been involved with the Noongar language project since its inception. A translation and interpretation initiative, he explains that Wirlomin refers to a people … a particular site, ceremony and song and tells of “spirits of the past, beyond the veil of death, acknowledging and speaking to those who have come to listen” (Albany Advertiser 2011, 13).
98 The play “Kullark” by Jack Davis was performed and published in 1982. It is an account of Noongar and European inter-relationships set on the Swan River around 1829. The writing of Davis, Mudrooroo Narogin and
… is fundamental … is a primal value. Continuity of place: from that you get the importance of relationship of all sorts. In literature – in terms of language and stories continuity is really important for us Indigenous people because that’s the culture, that’s the spirit. Culture is a manifestation of spirit. That’s not an intellectual concept; that’s what I feel. (Scott, in Brewster 2012, 232)

“Continuity of place” does not mean to imply that places do not change. Places by their natures are indeterminate and constantly changing, both in the physical and the cultural sense. There is never a “single place” but rather even the most particular place is surrounded by other places, and, temporally, and in terms of identity, experienced and remembered in a multiplicity of ways (Casey, 2007b, 22). Casey (2007b) draws attention to Basso’s writing in relation to the ways in which public memory “could remind us of this procession of ethics from place – to a genuinely place-based ethics”, something I would argue Noongar ceremony, with all that it entails in terms of everyday life, once served to do.99

In the novel, the ‘place’ of both Minang Noongar characters and European characters alike is a manifestation of the tension between the ‘natural’ environment and ‘cultural’ setting. There is a threshold in Scott’s writing, in his ability to insinuate multiple points of view through a multitude of voices. He reminds us that the ‘in between’ space is loaded with uncertainties and never straightforward, that events of the past leave traces in bodies, texts and landscapes, and that there is endless possibility in re-imagining the narrative, in remaking the story.100 Scott’s novel resists the narrative tropes of first encounter stories, of the binaries and the notion that it was all done and dusted back then in the past; there is a clear rejection of stasis, and the recognition of the fluidity of place, memory and storying.101 Indeed, That Deadman Dance attends to that deep sense of the “continuity of place”.

99 Casey suggests that “a local landscape” can be seen not as an “absolute in the local” (as in religious literalization of shrines and other such sites) but a renewed conception of “non-limited locality” in which “ethics spring from place unhidden yet compellingly”(2007b, 26).

100 Within the dominant discourses diversity of ethnicity and language is frequently represented as homogenous. But, as Gibson explains, one way to understand colonialism is as “a contest of interpretive categories and techniques colliding in a destabilised world where meanings, values and powers of self-determination all agitate against one another” (2002, 123).

101 I suggest that Scott’s representation of manifold voices that do not share the same vision provides a model for other writers to seek the remnant memories and multi-stranded stories, the ‘shadow lines’ that are secreted in the landscape of the Albany region.
In this respect, Scott’s writing resonates with Massey’s work in the way that there is a “genuine appreciation of the specificity of the local area” but in a manner that rejects the idea of a place as “always already coherent”. Characteristic of his writing is the way that it evokes place as “meeting place … as open rather than bounded, as an ongoing production rather than pre-given” (Massey 2006, 34). Evoking Noongar language, and through it, a sense of place that insists on a responsive reciprocity, Scott’s representations of the landscape signify a liveliness and mutability.

Boodawan, nyoondokat nyinang moort, moortapinyang yongar, wetj, wiló … Nitja boodja ngalak boodja Noonga boodjar, kwop nyoondok yoowarl koorl yey, yang ngaalang. … Because you need to be inside the sound and the spirit of it, to live here properly. And how can that be, without we people who have been here for all time. (395)

Not only the language, but the compositional strategies of Scott’s novel point to a place where change is inevitable. However, unlike other representations of Indigenous experience during the ‘foundation event’, Scott articulates a world frame that shows Noongar and Europeans responding to their alteration in circumstances in a multitude of ways. Adaptability, interactive capacity through language and a willingness to change are qualities reflected to various degrees in all of the characters in the novel, both Noongar and European.

Massey insists that this instability of landscapes, the tectonic wanderings that are accepted now in science and geography, presents the possibility for a “re-imagining of landscape and place … that leads even more clearly to an understanding of both place and landscape as events, as happenings, as moments that will be again dispersed” (Massey, 2006, 35). Important to my work is her idea that landscapes are like “ provisionally intertwined simultaneities of ongoing, unfinished, stories” (Massey 2006, 35).

In Scott’s earlier novel, Benang, the main protagonist Harley speaks from the heart, telling the reader, “I am a part of a much older story, one of a perpetual billowing from the sea, with its rhythm of return, return, return, and remain … there are many stories here, in the ashes below my feet” (1999, 497). This notion is echoed in That Deadman Dance, as Bobby negotiates the stories passed

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102 See Scott’s essay “Not So Easy: Language for a shared history” in which he describes the work of the 2006 Wirlomin project as “a beginning” (2015, 2010).
103 This is resonant with Casey’s (1997, 337) idea of place as eventmental.
down to him by the elders, those he gleans from English texts, and those that form within his own imagination.

Towards the conclusion of the novel, the capricious narrator reminds the reader of the tenuous truths, the delimiting nature of life rendered coherent and contained in the fixity of the written word, and firmly draws attention away from the intense personal narrative of the novel to the complexity of postcolonial Australia and the many contesting stories that are buried beneath the ground. The text is insistent in its endeavours to bring to the surface the voices that have long been forgotten and to facilitate remembrance.\(^{104}\) The reader is reminded that the dominant tropes of the ‘foundation event’ are, like all utterances, constructs, and that just below the surface lie the

bones from riverbanks washed down toward the sea, and only a kindred spirit and tongue can find them, maybe bring them alive again, even if in some other shape. (357)

The production and transmission of stories, whether oral or written, is an essential element in the making and holding of collective memory. Stories become especially important to communities that have been displaced, or where their familiar places have been degraded, even destroyed. Dunstone describes how in general, the colonists “did not accord memorial power to the antipodean world beyond their own, holding the natural Australian world, in Casey’s (1987, 312) phrase, to be ‘unambiguously outside the human subject’ rather than continuous with it” (2009, 144). While there were some notable attempts to record Indigenous knowledge by Europeans, either because of difficulties with translation or lack of interest, Noongar representations of the region and the period depicted in novels are few.\(^{105}\) This colonial insularity and its byproduct, fear of everything outside of the contained world they tried to reconstruct in the colony, and resistance to the idea that the Australian continent held memory of any lived experience outside of their own, led to virtually anything pertaining to Aboriginal ontology and epistemology being discounted.\(^{106}\)

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\(^{104}\) In his “poetics of representation” Carter suggests that it was “as if the colonists set out to erase the common ground where communication with the ‘Natives’ might have occurred. To found the colony, to inaugurate linear history, a puppet-theatre of marching soldiers and treadmills, was to embrace an environmental amnesia; it was actively to forget what wisdom the ground, and its people, might possess” (1996, 6).

\(^{105}\) See George Grey’s 1841 journals, for example.

\(^{106}\) Veronica Brady’s (2003) survey of the work of early poets and writers in Australia shows that “they expressed fear and alienation”, sentiments common among most settlers. And, as Terdiman (1993) has pointed out, the modern crisis of memory has, to some extent, been generated by a postcolonial anxiety about the past that has led
Scott’s portrayal of first encounters between the Minang Noongar custodians and the colonizing British, however, denotes a period of reciprocity where “the power and legitimacy of the invaders were most at risk, [and] the power and knowledge of Aborigines were held in most respect” (Hodge & Mishra 1991, 31). Throughout Australia’s colonial history there are numerous examples of the European folly of refusing assistance and discounting Indigenous knowledge. In the novel, the settler Geordie Chaine decides on an explorative expedition in order to acquire more land. In unfamiliar territory he becomes disoriented, but rather than listening to Bobby’s knowledge of the country, decides his European knowledge is superior and pushes his way through, with destructive consequences. At first, the settlers needed the extensive knowledge of the local people to travel through the terrain, but once they had a foothold they were able to dispense with, and then discount the importance of the Indigenous experience (Hodge and Mishra 1991, 31).

Lisa Slater (2005, 149) claims that the dominant Australian literary tropes have forced Indigenous people to “name themselves with names generated from histories, memories and imaginaries that are other to non-Indigenous Australians” and are “confronted by cultural difference that cannot and will not conform to non-Indigenous memories or history.”107 There is, therefore, something quite radical in Scott’s choices in the compositional strategies of That Deadman Dance. He states that he “wanted ambivalence and a lot of generosity. No real strong baddies in there. So the story itself, until the end, doesn’t fit the conventional narratives we have of our shared history” (Scott, in Brewster 2012, 2).

Bobby Wabalanginy’s performance of the “Dead Man Dance” that skilfully incorporates what he observes of the soldiers into the form of the ancient ceremonial dances, the elder Wunyengan’s irony in naming the resentment of the whites when the Noongar pick up their habits with aplomb and mirror them back to them, point the reader to a powerful act of appropriation. The novel depicts complexity and ambiguity, but it also reveals what remains unresolved and, hopefully, possibilities for a relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians that is responsive and reciprocal.108 Tiffany Shellam claims that it was not a “simple takeover”, and that there was a

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107 “Some might place Australian Indigenous writing within the realm of Australian literature, but there is a wider context; that of the emergence of Australia, as a nation, at the same time as some stories which have grown from our land continued or were adapted, or died forever. Australian literature, in such a context, is a sickly stream” (Scott, in Heiss 2003, i).

108 Notwithstanding the power of the ‘legitimising’ project, Shellam writes that, “rendering [Aboriginal people and their world] into a British one recurs in Australian historiography and public histories around the country, and [this] serves to cloak the ways in which Aboriginal people [ ] also appropriated and understood the British within their
“fusion of cultural expectations and material culture” between both Noongar and the British settlers (2009, xii).

This is a useful point to remember, but while it is true that in *That Deadman Dance* Scott refrains from reductive binaries, depicting the agency of Noongar characters in forming the fledgling colony and representing reciprocal relationships between the Noongar and British settlers, the novel in no way implies an even playing field. Rather, we are left with the sense of lost opportunities, of ‘if onlys’, of ‘what might have been’ had the ‘founding event’ been managed differently. In this way, although the novel describes events that are on the historical, and therefore, the written record, it challenges the colonial ‘truths’ insofar as it attempts to redress the silencing of Noongar language and perspectives. In doing so, Scott opens up possibilities for different understandings of belonging and identity, deploying language differently, inviting the reader to hear what has long been forgotten through the written record. In *Disputed Territory* the author explains that

It heartens me to know that the country I am descended from is boundary territory; between peoples, between desert and sea. In some of the maps – to the extent that you can ever trust them – it is even that labelled ‘disputed territory’. The place I write from is also a particular and specific historical place, which might also be thought of as ‘disputed territory’. (in Brewster et al 2000, 171)

Echoing Casey’s work on embodied memory, Jill Bennett describes memory in terms of the senses and how remembering is experienced as “a continuous negotiation of the present with indeterminable links with the past” (2008, 38). For Bennett, the poetics of sense memory involves not so much “speaking of” but speaking out of a particular memory or experience– in other words speaking from the body *sustaining sensation*” (2008, 38; original emphasis). This has particular resonance in creative production and is salient in reading Scott’s work, imbued and embedded as it is in Minang Noongar country, drawing on the historical record and facticity. The opening chapter of

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109 Shellam cautions against an unnuanced reading, and while the title of her book *Shaking Hands on the Fringe* (2009) positions the story of the founding of the colony at King George’s Sound as a “friendly frontier” her work points to the appropriation of land and resources, and the subjugation of the Noongar peoples that was the ultimate outcome of the encounter.

110 Any historical representation based on archival sources, should be read with Gibson’s revelations of how the “gun and the pen took the country” in mind. While writing about Queensland, Gibson’s (2002, 73) descriptions of how the white police officers of the Native Police were “indulging themselves in the field and governing themselves in their reports” while dancing “a two-step of violent action and circumspect remembrance” is pertinent to colonial activities across the continent, including the settlement of King George’s Sound.
That Deadman Dance plays on words, plays with words. The reader is plunged into that contested territory where the seventeenth century colonial hegemony proclaims new terms and insists on the discontinuity of the Indigenous culture, including, significantly, evidence of the overriding legitimacy of literacy and the deficit of the oral tradition.

Kaya, Writing such a word, Bobby Wabalanginy couldn’t help but smile. Nobody ever writ that before, he thought. Nobody ever writ hello or yes that way!

Roze a wail ...

Bobby Wabalanginy wrote with damp chalk, brittle as weak bone. Bobby wrote on a thin piece of slate. Moving between languages, Bobby wrote on stone.

Boby Wablngn wrote roze a wail. (1)

Intrinsic to the form and narrative of the novel is the seminal role writing plays in the colonizing process. Gibson identifies “a ‘pathological’ disconnection between doing and declaring” that gave those wielding the pens a clear advantage (2002, 73). As he grows older, Bobby Wabalanginy experiences this, and comes to see all too well that his youthful confidence in the power of the written word lies not in the words, but those who control them.112

The production of text, finding a place on the public record is how history is made, and as Campbell explains, paper and text are weapons that serve colonial interests. “Everywhere Nyoongars are processed, there is a paper trail” (2014, 235). To write or not to write? Scott has talked candidly about his uncertainties in deploying the form of the novel, the written word being implicated as it is in the loss of so many Indigenous languages and cultural mechanisms.114 He explains that “this is a society that does not allow the possibility of being part-Aboriginal. Such is ‘our’ society’s division, and its history, that one is either Aboriginal or not. There is no middle ground” (2000, 169).115

111 The play on the word, ‘wail’ signifies the violent dislocation of the Minang Noongar from their country, and gestures to the importance of whales, which were also violently displaced, in the cultural life of the people.
112 Campbell suggests that “The disjunction between ‘civilising’ and euphemistic discourse and the barbaric acts it legitimates magnifies the dehumanising features of the colonial discourse” (2014, 242).
113 Campbell has followed this spelling used in the novel Benang.
114 Well outside the constraints of customary Australian writing, Scott explores “the idea of one being linguistically displaced and dispossessed, even in one’s own country; and then language comes back and one makes oneself an instrument for it and for the spirit of place” (Brewster 2012, 229).
115 See Natalie Quinlivan (2014), “Finding a Place in Story: Kim Scott’s Writing and the Wirlomin Noongar Language and Stories Project” for more on the issue of writers’ identity and the problematic nature of terms such as ‘Indigenous author’ or ‘Australian author’.
Over a decade later, writing at the cultural interface is rigorously contested, and Aboriginal literature and Aboriginal writers are no longer easily constrained at the margins, refusing to be labelled or indeed to be told what and how they are to write. However, cultural advancement notwithstanding, the text, through the mechanisms of the language and form deployed in the writing, asks that the reader consider Scott’s right to write, and how the writing intersects with ‘foundation event’ literature and with ‘postcolonial’ writing in contemporary Australia.

Whose story, through which lens are such events to be represented? Within the context of the novel these are important considerations; Scott underscores the inherent power of discourse with respect to what will be remembered and what will be forgotten. Writing after 9/11, Casey explains that public memory is constitutive of identities of many kinds and that its power “once formed and sedimented– resides in its capacity to be located in the margins of our lives” (2007b, 18). In this way memory is maintained within “our various identities, specifying what kinds of citizens, family members, friends, and social agents we are” (2007b, 19).

He goes on to say that wounded places embody mourning for the place itself, both the place provided by human activity, including buildings, as well as the place on which they stood, which is all that now remains, but also the aspirations attached to that place and the loss of what may have occurred had the place remained intact (2007b, 22). The locale of That Deadman Dance is a wounded site of contested and conflicting stories, and writing and publishing such a story is a significant accomplishment in terms of what constitutes collective or public memory.

Moreover, remembering and memorializing is complex and multi-stranded, and even with committed effort to suppress or deny, forgetting is not easy. As Gibson puts it, “Wishful amnesia is no protection against memories of actual, lived experience. The events of the past rarely pass” (2002, 179). Stored within stories, memories are passed down through the generations, albeit in an ever-changing reconstituted form. Displacement and dispossession live on in the remembering of the Noongar people of the south-west. While nothing more than a skilful work of fiction, the lived experience that was played out within the landscape, and the memories of the place represented in Scott’s novel serve as a memorial, a reminder of events that have, and continue to take place. In a recent essay, Scott describes a young Noongar boy learning the skills and knowledge that will serve

Casey claims that “public memory is radically bivalent in its temporality, for it is both attached to the past (typically, an originating or traumatic event of some sort) and attempts to secure a future of further remembering of that same event” (2007b, 1). In the case of literature, the responsive reader continually reconstitutes the
him when he is a man, the natural rhythms sung (and danced) through “the stories of his place” (2015, 202).

Singing the country, both land and sea, is frequently referenced in Scott’s version of events: an intrinsic, inseparable aspect of the practices of the Minang Noongar in their connection, knowledge and management of the natural environment, and important to my project, memorialization and retention of culture. As Ong (2002) suggests, the rhythmic quality of songs and dance allows complex ideas to be communicated through more easily remembered mnemonic patterns.

However, Gibson argues that on the Australian continent it was “as if the surface of the land was all the Europeans cared about. They seemed to have no concern for the deeper forces or spirits that created the country and maintained it in all its changeable depths and charges” (2002, 139). As the narrative of the novel moves forward Scott denotes the rapid changes to the environment; the settlers systematically exploited the biodiversity of the native fauna, hacked down trees, rearranged and polluted precious water sources, mapped, fenced and caused the accumulation of refuse of the kind never seen by Noongar before. The proliferation of hard hoofed livestock and other plants and animals that accompanied the ships and were delivered onto the shores of what is now known as King George’s Sound, led to farming and agricultural practices that would change the nature of the land forever.

“Wisdom sits in places” – That Deadman Dance speaks back to a specific time and place of a decisive event in Western Australia’s history. The novel is testimony to the formidable knowledge and skills of the Minang Noongar held in their language, and within the songs and stories of their sacred ceremonies over many thousands of years. Bobby Wabalanginy is given the stories when Menak and the other elders consider it’s time for him to have them, in the way cultural assets have been passed down through the generations over thousands of years.

Bobby Wabalanginy heard the stories so many times they lived as memory, and now he told them as if he was the central character: the gifts, the sails, the Dead Man Dance, the whale and his mother, the shifting deck beneath the enclosed wind rushing them out past the islands to the horizon and back.

Deirdre Wilcock et al (2013, 24) point to the contested nature of terms of ‘Indigenous’ and ‘scientific’ knowledge and argue for an emergent space where a useful ethical and effective communication could be framed.
Old Bobby Wabalanginy remembered Menak the storyteller - the old man with his many ridges of scars and his high forehead catching the firelight, sharing his younger self with Wabalanginy, the most avid of listeners. Bobby Wabalanginy shivered, because now he was the old man, and the young ones never listened as he had. (73-74)

In the novel the characters of Menak and Manit are the oracles, foreshadowing the disruption of the traditions of Noongar story and song and with it, all the Noongar knowledge and spirit intrinsic to their longstanding relationship with their place. “Menak made an incision in the whale to release its spirit. It was something he’d done with Wabalanginy’s father. But what man stood beside him now?” (254) The whale motif runs through the narrative as a metaphor of possibility and loss, but the exploitation of whales for monetary gain is also a tangible feature of the colonial agenda. The whale has a strong and enduring status in Minang Noongar community life, but after the arrival of numerous whaling ships, which were in turn supported by the settlers, they became collateral damage of the colonizing project.118

Vivid descriptions of landscape and wildlife, and an evocation of place that seems to transcend the material limitations of time, create the world-frame of the novel and provide a window through which to view that ‘real world’ that existed before.

Wooral shed his clothes, and the dying sun lit the drops of water on his dark and greased skin. He shook his head and his hair sprang up in exclamation marks all round his face. He laughed, teeth bright in his beard. Look at him! Full with ocean, wind and rain, the energy of it, the size and the strength of the whale! Wooral can hardly swim, and yet he speared and seized a whale right out at sea. (268)

The image of a strong man connected fully to the environment contrasts with the soldier Killam, who, Scott writes, was as “sullen as ever” (268). The “deadman dance” is the metaphor for, and provides the articulation of, a time of monumental shifts, both in the form of individual

See also A. Agrawal (1995) “Dismantling the divide between indigenous and scientific knowledge.”
118 Lady Anna Brassey’s account during her 1887 visit to Albany in the “Sunbeam” explains that with “their usual short sightedness”, the crews “were not content with killing their prey (whales) in the usual manner, [but] took to blowing them up with dynamite; the result being that they killed more than they could deal with and frightened the remainder away.”
transformation and collective cultural intersection and exchange. Through the dance, Bobby Wabalanginy reveals the twists and turns of his own life, and in so doing mirrors to his audience (both on and off the page) an embodied vision of what has transpired there at the foundation frontier.

Resonating with Campbell’s (2014) work on the agency implicit in heteroglossic texts that open to uncertainty and change, Scott has said that he hopes

the story is about creativity and spirit, about strength: strong Noongar characters. And about possibility being lost. And so the connection between the resolution and the conventional historical narrative does, I hope, a lot of political work through those resonances. (in Brewster 2012, 2)

The author hopes that the story is affirming, a story that views through a positive lens a version of the ‘foundation event’ at King George’s Sound. But, he adds, “the ending reminds us how it intersects with the historical narrative, the theme of which is something close to defeat” (Scott in Brewster 2012, 2). At the conclusion of the novel, Bobby Wabalanginy entreats the audience at his last ditch effort to make some sense of what is happening. He proffers what he best has to offer, story, song and dance, appealing for what he sees as the common understandings for any viable future in this place the Noongar and colonists share, achieving, perhaps, at least for a moment what Casey describes when memory and place are embodied in performance, as “that of congealing the disparate into a provisional unity” (1987, 202; original emphasis). The moment, the memory, does not endure, except now on the leaf-like pages of a book.

Faces – turned away from him. Bobby felt as if he had surfaced in some other world. Chairs creaked as people stirred, coughing. Chaine led them to their feet. Figures at the periphery of Bobby’s vision fell away. He heard gunshots. And another sound: a little dog yelping. (395)

In this chapter I have argued that Scott’s re-imagining of the ‘foundation event’ resists the dominant narrative and encompasses a quality of open-ended fluidity. In doing so, the novel provides a threshold for multiple readings that point to the other stories that linger in the landscape. In That Deadman Dance, nothing is fixed. Place and memory, like the identities of the novel’s characters,

119 Campbell notes how Scott is able to draw “beauty back from abjection” (2014,
are in a constant state of change, a perpetual flux that implies a recursive reflexivity in the way they are represented. The memories projected onto contested colonial spaces form part of an ongoing legacy of colonialism, and with this in mind, I suggest that the decisions they make to deny or embrace these multiple and co-existing stories is intrinsic to the work of novelists. Scott’s dynamic narrative testifies to the way that the sense of place is a complex site of intersecting stories that are frequently discounted or even forgotten, but can be found in the traces they leave within the landscape.
Coupar made his way up to the flat top of the hill and the remains of the Looking Seat. Removing a few fallen lumps of rock, he sat in the generous space between the granite armrests and looked down at the creaming lines of surf on the beaches that stretched away west, one after another, to Angelus, and in particular the beach directly below where his grandfather had hunted whales a century and a half ago, where his father had shot himself, where the ribs and vertebrae of whales and other mammals surfaced each season on the moving sands. From here there had always been for Coupar a sense of perspective: there was order and sense, each landmark, each familiar plane of light or darkness consistent with memory and history, an immemorial constant around which, upon which, all else happened. To the north, the Ranges, to the east the white sides of Jimmy’s Rock; to the west the cloudy tips of Four-Peaks; to the south-west only Bald Island hugging the thin shoulders of Stormy Beach. Ocean. Sky. Dead land. (Shallows, 72)
Shallows, by Tim Winton, intersects in interesting ways with That Deadman Dance, particularly because they are both set on common ground at the southern tip of Western Australia. The novels resonate in other ways, too, in that both writers are deeply concerned with place and landscape, and the memories and stories that haunt them. Shallows is a novel in which being able, or as it turns out, unable, to find and articulate a sense of place, is central to everything that unfolds in the story. Meaning in the lives of the characters comes only from where they find themselves, in Angelus, a town that represents the barely concealed whaling town of Albany. It is with this in mind that I examine the rich mnemonic landscapes represented in the novel and consider the author’s capacity to reveal the paradoxical nature of place remembered through generations and the way that this might bring about a feeling of belonging and of being at home in the world.

I am particularly interested in the way that Shallows evokes a sense of place that embraces continuity and discontinuity, stability and dislocation and in considering what this might mean in terms of Gibson’s claim that Australia is “under-endowed” with myths of “belonging” (1992, 64). I argue that a sense of place is formed through an interpretive lens and I draw on Ricoeur’s (2003) theorization of alterity as well as a consideration of the way that stories provide opportunities for translation and a shared understanding to facilitate reconciliation and healing. My concern is with the decisions that inform all forms of storytelling about what will be remembered and what will be forgotten. In accord with James Sire, I argue that Shallows interrogates the trope of “the innocent bystander—the malaise of lack of commitment, the belief that everything is of equal merit or demerit, with truth reduced to a linguistic fabrication” (1997, 178). While the characters of the novel are emplaced in a landscape that tests them, it is words and representation that challenge them most.

In his exploration of place in the novel, Winton creates an imaginative world-frame that reveals how the characters shape and are shaped by their environment, and how the urge to record and share activates memory and creates stories. Through a diverse procession of characters, Winton shows that remembering and storytelling are intrinsic to the sense of place embodied in his writing.120 “I always start a novel thinking about the landscape first. A place I have seen and that struck me. Then I move onto the story and characters” (Winton in Ben-Messahel 2006,103).

His writing is well known for its evocations of a sense of place, and descriptions of landscape figure strongly in his work in a style that Sahlia Ben-Messahel suggests reveals a sense of place as

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120 As an adolescent, Winton lived for four years in Albany in the south-west of Western Australia, and has spoken
both a geographic and imaginative “territory of the mind” (2006, 104).\textsuperscript{121} While the specificity of the particular locales informs his depiction of places, Winton’s writing engages with place beyond geographic representation and draws attention to the ways in which places embody memory, imagination and story in their capacity to carry substantial entities (or at least ghostly ones) and signify the multifarious nature of places over time. The “harbour is still as memory . . .” (ix) – harbouring the lives of past generations. Water as a vessel of forgiveness and renewal is a common trope in the author’s work, but as \textit{Shallows} reveals, reconciliation with the past is not easily achieved.

Embodying the past while emplaced in the present, the characters engage in a traumatic process of remembering and re-remembering, re-imagining and retelling, so that the atrocities recorded in 1831 in the journals of the whaler/settler Nathaniel Coupar continue to be reconstituted as family and national myths.\textsuperscript{122} His grandson, Daniel Coupar’s thoughts and memories bear down on him, and he asks: “How long will the land mourn, and the grass of every field wither? For the wickedness of those who dwell in it the beasts and the birds are swept away” (69).\textsuperscript{123} Nevertheless, Daniel’s granddaughter, Queenie Cookson, is not taken in by the family’s stories of the past. Questioning memory and disrupting the sense of place and belonging, she says, “My family is a myth” (26). The things the family have said, the way they have presented the ‘truth’, even the history written in the journals of their forebears, all of it is a construction, a fiction– spin. Winton is unambiguous about the lack of veracity: handing the journals to Queenie’s husband Cleve, Daniel tells him to, “Read them properly. Read it for the things that aren’t there” (14).

\textit{Shallows} opens in the period of 1831, Winton’s description of the ‘sport’ of the settlers and convict men signifying the power structures in the fledgling colony where the convicts compete violently with one another under the supervision of the governors. And in their surroundings, there is evidence of imperialism’s inherent violation of the land and sea– the economic imperative for land and resources has already marked the place. This is the legacy that the novel’s characters, all settler descendents, will confront.

\textsuperscript{121} This idea is also discussed by Tacey who maintains Winton “creates a depth dimension in a society that constantly pushes us to the surface”, referring as well to other writers of fictional novels such as Patrick White, Helen Garner, Richard Flanagan, David Malouf and Grant Watson (2000, 86-87).

\textsuperscript{122} In 1849, Captain John Lort Stokes wrote of the 16,000 kangaroo skins traded from Albany the year before, describing the “vast herds of kangaroo upon the grassy savannahs” and lamenting that the practice of mass slaughter was unsustainable as well as being an invasion and having a detrimental effect on the “wandering people of the soil” (cited Bolton 1981, 55).
Characteristically for the author, the ocean features strongly in *Shallows*, although unlike many of his other works, it is not in terms of the surf and beach culture. Sea and land constitute margins, and it is in the border of the littoral where the lives of the characters become enmeshed. Many of Winton’s narratives are located at the edge of the sea, and writing about the trope of water in the author’s work, Ashcroft (2014, 24) notes that “the epitome of the society hovering, unsuspectingly, on the edge of the spiritual and imaginative possibilities of water, is ironically, the fishing village.” It is within the borderlands of the littoral that the people of Angelus undertake their interior explorations. Winton has called himself a “littoralist”, inhabiting “that peculiar zone of overlap and influx, [that] sustains my spirit and fuels my work” (2013, np). He has frequently made the point that

Nowhere else on the continent is the sense of being trapped between sea and desert so strong as in Western Australia. In many places along this vast and lonely coastline the beach is the only margin between them. From the sea you look directly upon red desert and from the wilderness there is the steely shimmer of the Indian Ocean. (1993, 38)

Margins and boundaries are germane to the historical uncertainty and unsettled hauntings that preoccupy the people of Angelus. Winton suggests that “Australians are surrounded by ocean and ambushed from behind by desert– a war of mystery on two fronts” (1993,16; my emphasis). His writing in general and *Shallows* in particular, attests to an abiding uneasiness within the settler descendent protagonists of both the dislocated Indigenous people and the destruction of the environment, most especially seen in the novel through the massacre of the whales. The arrival of the international anti-whaling activists defines those who live in the town and benefit from the whaling economy, forcing them to take a position in relation to whaling and management of the environment in general. Their anxiety is expressed in violent opposition– depending on whose side they are on. In the case of some it manifests in much soul searching about their part in the destruction and their obligations to this place they call home.

The novel is set in Noongar country. The Reverend Pell names the paradox he sees in his Christian gesture of bringing blankets to the Noongar camp on the outskirts of the town when, in the

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123 Jeremiah 12:4 (ESV; original emphasis).
124 He adds, “We have so much more landscape and coastline than people. … We have had more than our fair share of shoreline miracles, of visitations and wonders” (1993, 38).
125 In an address to the Royal Academy, London, Winton employed ‘island’ as a trope to speak about Australian national identity and relationship to the land (November 14, 2013).
1800s, the blankets given to the Noongar people contributed to many deaths from smallpox and influenza. The custodial relationship of the Noongar and their country is not spelled out, and the Noongar characters are not fleshed out. They exist either as a ‘ghostly’ presence, or through references to their dependence on charity and the consumption of alcohol that depict the position of many Aboriginal people in the Western Australian rural towns of 1970s Australian society. In my reading, Noongar people continue narrating their own stories, whether acknowledged by others or not, and these stories still constitute and reverberate within the landscape.

As well as his undeniable attachment to writing through landscape, or indeed perhaps because of it, Winton’s writing is deeply concerned with Australia as a nation. Emplacement and belonging, and gendered and racial identity are persistent themes in his writing (McCredden and O’Reilly 2014, 11). Language, and the stories that are created from it, customarily reveal the correlation of place and identity and is particularly apparent in his work. Winton says that “To be a writer or an artist preoccupied with landscape is to accept a weird and constant tension between the indoors and the outdoors, the abstract and the sensual. You work with mind and body” (2013, np).

The town harbours not only whales and whaling boats, but a cast of people who exhibit grotesque qualities and behaviours. Like the whales, they do not operate well in the shallow waters where the town is situated. A sense of place is important for the characters who are attempting to find meaning in their lives— but they feel dislocated in the town of Angelus. And while in Winton’s imaginative world-frame the Noongar are shadowy figures never quite part of the story, they are always there, reminding the ‘settler’ characters in the novel of their presence and the reader of the way in which Noongar people’s voices and stories were and are marginalized within the social structures of the town. In general, the whitefellas are not sympathetic characters— they’re damaged, inarticulate, with little ability to listen, or be truly heard, their voices lost in the static of the scrambling voices of the past.

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126 Less than a decade before the novel is set, the 1967 Referendum gave Commonwealth parliament power to legislate in terms of Aboriginal people. Michael R. Griffith’s (2014, 91) comment in relation to Cloudstreet that perhaps the novel’s “greatest success addressing Indigenous presence as constitutive of settler-colonial habitation is also the source of its profound failure: the reproduction of an ideology of settler-colonial innocence through the apparent naivety of the settler-inheritor”, is salient but I contend that in Shallows many of the characters express either conscious denial, anxiety or regret about the dispossession of the Noongar people.

127 Ben-Messahel describes the presence of Indigenous characters in Winton’s work as “the guardian of the sacred land, as the silenced other and the absent presence” (2006, 213).

128 Thomas describes many of Winton’s characters as “hopeless … even repulsive and the social and physical landscapes within which they operate are often oppressive and demoralising” (2007, 16).
For the most part, the residents of the town struggle to articulate their predicament, perched as they are at the edge of the land and the sea. Winton says that

People have terrible yearnings and feelings. They know what they think and they know what they want to say, but they just don’t have the words. It’s not so much the vocabulary; the words are in their throat, but they’re not on their tongue. (Winton in Willbanks 1991,195)\(^{129}\)

Living in Angelus in the 1970s, the characters are well aware that they are not innocent; indeed they all (except for the irredeemable businessman, Des Pustlings, who it must be said Winton has portrayed as a rather unconvincing caricature) seek to know and to atone for the transgressions of their forebears.\(^{130}\) Moved to act by their sense of the uncanny, Reverend Pell, Daniel Coupar, Queenie and her husband Cleve are each on a quest, albeit in their very own ways, to rectify the injustice, and most significantly, to acknowledge their part in it.\(^{131}\)

And even though they feel connected to the land, it is “dead land”. When Coupar is given a chance to be reborn, coming “floundering into the shallows of Middle Beach, full of seawater and a curious light,” he is incapable of transforming his habitual behaviour, handing the property over to the town’s corrupt developer rather than offering the land any protection. And just as Queenie and Cleve have existential, transformative experiences on the water, it is in warm water that the whales become stranded and will ultimately die. Shallows is signposted with both symbolic and historic references throughout, and as in all of his work, ‘death’ is a conspicuous trope. Before dying in an ‘accidental’ fall, Maureen Coupar describes a dream to her husband Daniel.\(^{132}\) She explains:

there is this little girl swimming like a fish only there’s no water and she’s wriggling

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\(^{129}\) In an interview with Andrew Taylor, Winton said, “I’ve been fascinated with the efficacy of language or the failures of language to communicate. … Some people have an enormous capacity for communication that bypasses words” (1996).

\(^{130}\) In a clear allusion to the colonial rape of the country, Marion Lowell, Pustling’s ‘secretary’, is obliged to have sexual intercourse with her boss, feeling “invaded by a viscous but sterile torrent” (54).

\(^{131}\) This contrasts to Winton’s Dirt Music (2001), where Luther Fox’s life has been a “project of forgetting … setting out wilfully to disremember … forgetting is a mercy” (103-4).

\(^{132}\) I am aware that Winton’s representations of gendered and racial identity have not been without criticism. His female characters have been criticised as silenced and powerless, that they frequently self harm and die a violent death. Winton rejects these criticisms, arguing that many of the women in his fiction, “despite their flaws and demons, are smart and self-possessed” and “in many ways superior to the men around them” (Winton in Ben-Messahel, 2012, 2). In Shallows, Queenie Coupar-Cookson while conflicted and in pain, embodying, like all of the characters, the burden of the past, is independent and articulate, goes on to inhabit other Winton stories such as
about in a patch of red dirt and her ribs are all showing, she’s got not clothes on, and you can tell she’s hungry, she moves her mouth, it’s all swollen and dry and the teeth are black. … She looks as if she’s calling out but there’s no sound. (73)

This is a wounded place, and the traces that linger in the landscape point to a violent and irreverent dispossession. Through the multiple voices and layered memories, Winton assimilates details of the 1970s political and social milieu and evokes the trope of the ‘innocent bystander’ that enabled many of the government policies and community behaviours to continue unchallenged. Although the novel does not represent the direct voices of Noongar people, the death of the football protégée Abbie Tanks, is emblematic of the overt racism of the time, signifying ‘drinking rights’ for Indigenous people, the important relationship they have with the game, and the extreme opposition to those who tried to do something against the grain. Winton also references the Noongar attachment to country. “They [locals] never leave for good,” [the publican, Staats] says. “Even if they come back horizontal, they come back some time” (118). Sadly in the case of Tanks this proves to be true, he comes ‘home’ in a coffin. Even though it is Staats who supplies alcohol to the Noongars (and anyone else: there is a lot of alcohol consumed in the town), his hotel is the site of “disputed territory”; in his own unsettled state, he determines who is in and who is out, asserting his entitlement in the place, and his ‘Australian’ identity. Staat’s pub substantializes Western Australia’s 1905 Aboriginal “Protection” Act, and the Australian Commonwealth ‘White’ Australia policies of the 20th century, and in this way the novel serves to remind the reader that this place, like all places, cannot be represented by one narrative but embodies multi-layered, conflicting and contesting stories that are frequently marginalized in the dominant discourses.

Sissy Helff (2014, 224) describes Winton’s writing as weaving “mnemonic landscapes of Australia that include – in addition to histories of settler-colonialism – processes of modernisation, accounts of immigration and the politics of decolonising identity” that far from dwelling in nostalgia for a lost past, present “an intimate form of reconciliation” (2014, 225). Nevertheless, a rigorous concern for how writers negotiate the contested nature of belonging is appropriate given the dispossession and silencing of Indigenous people that has occurred. This applies unreservedly to any

“Laps” where her choices are greatly improved.

133 The hotel is named the ‘Colonial’. It can be argued that Australian Rules football is derived from Marn Grook, recorded as being played by Aboriginal men and boys in Victoria as early as the 1840s. Many of the early Aboriginal Australian footballers had been taken from their families as children and experienced a high level of racism generally. Racism is still a big issue in football.

134 See Scott’s “Disputed Territory” (2000).
reading of *Shallows.*

Victoria Kuttainen argues that in *unsettling* stories the lineage-tracing trope reveals a twinned, contradictory trajectory– on the one hand, settler belonging is marked by alienation; origins are plots of interruption and unsettlement that confront settlers with the fact of their alien presence in Australia as lost characters who do not belong. On the other hand, this genealogy of loss gives settlers a form of earned credibility and battle scars to show just how much they do belong. (2010, 243)

Kuttainen’s observations are important– within the world frame of the novel the postcolonial tropes of displacement, alienation, marginalization and trauma are clearly evident. Winton explains that “… the past is unavoidable, it’s there in all my work. The past has its consolations but often it’s just a knife twisting in an old wound. Either way, as Faulkner said, it’s never over” (in Rossiter 2004, 38; my emphasis).

As I have referred to earlier, the structural devices of *Shallows* that point to the wounds inflicted as a result of deeds of the past, encompass the violent dispossession of the Noongar people of the region. The practice of non-Indigenous writers invoking an historical genealogy, as Winton does in the novel, can be hazardous as long as there remains unresolved tension in the privileging of history from the perspective of the settler hegemony, and story generally, where Indigenous voices are marginalized. But I suggest that a reading of the novel that pays attention to Noongar dispossession reveals the author’s understanding of the capacity of places to hold memory, and the opportunity for stories to assist in the reconciliation of people and their places.

When in a journal entry for July 31st 1875, Nathaniel writes: “A man has only himself and his cunningness and stubbornness, brute strength and wit. He has no need of forgiveness. And should I have need of it?” (158-9), we apprehend Winton’s purpose. Stories like *Shallows* that evoke the fluidity and multi-layered nature of place and the memories that cohere, can play a significant role in healing the wounds of dislocation. And following Ricoeur, I argue that it is with the “small narratives that we are now progressing our discussion” (2003,10). Helff points out that Winton’s work should be read in the light of Ricoeur’s theorisation of the complexity and importance of translation and “linguistic hospitality” (2014, 221). Describing the difficulties of living together in

135 Scott’s *Benang* (1999) and *That Deadman Dance* (2010) draw on archival sources and examine genealogy,
post Cold War Europe, Ricoeur suggests that “[t]he first difference which calls for transference and hospitality is a difference of memory, precisely at the level of customs, rules, norms, beliefs and convictions which constitute the identity of a culture” (1995, 5-6).

Winton shows the role discourse plays in collective memory through the device of Nathaniel Coupar’s journals, and the way that the present day descendents can inhabit the past, owning or disowning memories of the place, reconfiguring what they want of the record to be remembered or forgotten by withholding, even destroying the evidence. It is not memory as such, but the transmission of memory that is foremost in collective identity, with all its related questions of discursive participation and power. And it is in the sharing of stories that memory is communicated; Helff seeks to show the way that Shallows constructs an imaginative frame of a multicultural Australia “by applying diegetic modes of exchanging memories as well as using reciprocal interactions between the reader and the texts” (2014, 222).

As the novel reveals, memory is less about the past than the present. Because it is always experienced in the present, the inaccessibility of the past insists on an imaginative narrative to bring the memory forth in its idealized form. If stories of the past matter at all, and are able to deepen the quality of cultural understanding, an awareness of the nature of memory with its inherent intangibility, its vulnerability to amendment and adjustment, is necessary. Comprised of shifting meanings, this is an essential aspect of recalling the past; memory is never settled or secure.

John P. Turner has shown that the plot of Shallows is based largely on what occurred at Cheynes Beach in 1977, and he points out that the novel displays the author’s facility for writing fiction that is emplaced in known landscapes, and with clear resonances with the historical record (1993, 80). But the country embraces multi-layered memories and multi-stranded stories; silence and forgetting adheres to this place, and the telling is painful and never straightforward. As Helff suggests, the story world of Shallows is concerned with fictionalising personal embodied experience of remembering while trying to come to terms with its deep-rootedness in an emotional premise Judith Wright once claimed to be particularly white Australian experience, namely love for one’s country and ‘the guilt of invasion’. (2014, 226)

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language, displacement and the way that ‘history’ is determined, as does Curtin’s The Sinkings (2008).

Like the landscape that is in a constant state of shifting, building, eroding, reforming, and like stories that are never static, and never complete, the characters struggle with the capriciousness of remembering, and re-remembering, searching for meanings that can never be definitive. Queenie’s faith in remembering is undermined when she realises that her ‘memory’ of her grandfather pulling her grandmother from the tractor wreck with superhuman strength is a story her grandfather fabricated to conceal what really happened, just as the activist, Georges Fleurier, searches for answers in the “wrecks and salvage and mystery” (39).137

In *Shallows*, time and memory are explicitly referenced through diaries of the Albany region dating 1831, as well as in the frequent allusions to the ancient history of the landscape itself.138 The people of Angelus are lost, on a journey of self-discovery to find meaning in the universe, or as Roie Thomas says, “acknowledging the cyclical historical continuum of humanity’s destructive choices” (2007, 10). In Winton’s hands the past is a constantly recurring pattern, like waves rolling across the ocean– Pell still delivers blankets, the whales still beach themselves, and the ‘Pustlings’ of the nation still plot who and what they can exploit and where the next dollar will come from.139 Even as Fleurier insists that our “future lies in communication between species, co-existence with the environment. Not in the follies of the past” (39), Winton makes it clear that it is difficult to subvert the hegemony or even to learn from past mistakes.

Working on a project with Winton and Mowaljarlai, Hannah Rachel Bell proposes that storymaking “warps the experience of chronological time in a similar way as extremes of emotion do” and proposes thinking of time “as a map rather than a measure or clock” (2009, 69). She suggests that Winton’s characters are reminiscent of “the travels of the *Wanjina* in that landscape map of a constant now, real, littoral, living” and asks, “Is the creative world a littoral space, a constant now with only before and after?” (2009, 69).140

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137 Like the Diviner in *Tourmaline*, and the town Outer Maroo in *Oyster*, Fleurier brings word from outside the town- but in this case the outcome is positive in that commercial whaling ceased in 1978 at Cheynes Beach, the last to operate in Australia.
138 This corresponds interestingly with the locale and period of Scott’s *That Deadman Dance*.
139 Winton describes his character as “the Chamber of Commerce mentality that I can’t bear … the spirit that really came of age in the 1980s, the scamming corporate cowboy culture […] like a toxin we can’t shake off” (McGirr, 1999, 38).
140 During the 1990s Winton spent time in the Kimberley region of W.A. where he developed a friendship with the Ngarinyin people, including commencing a long-distance dialogue with the elder Mowaljarlai, whom he didn’t meet in person until 2006. For the people of the Kimberley the *Wanjina* represents cloud and rain spirits who created and influenced the landscape and its inhabitants. Images of the *Wanjina* were painted on cave walls thousands of years ago and are being cared for by descendents today.
As the title adroitly suggests, *Shallows* is a novel as much about the psycho-social aspects of life in Angelus as the physical land and seascapes. There are “a heap of theories” why whales beach themselves, becoming stranded from the sea, but, as the activist Marks explains, “Whales don’t operate their best in shallow water. [They] make mistakes, get frantic, they’re stuck. … Being a whale in shallow water is a godawful business” (136).

At the conclusion of *That Deadman Dance*, Bobby Wabalanginy speaks to an unhearing audience of ‘settlers’. In the distance there is the sound of a little dog yelping, a shot fired. The legacy of that moment is, for the people of Angelus who inhabit the place in the 1970s, a tangible presence in their lives; in the shadowy, dislocated Aboriginal characters who have no voice, and in their inheritance of a place that embodies all that is implied by a colonial economic imperative where the exploitation of the natural resources is paramount. Unlike their author, the characters in the novel personify displacement and disenchantment with the landscape they inhabit.

In his memoir *Land’s Edge*, Winton claims that there is “nowhere else I’d rather be. Nothing else I’d prefer to be doing. I am at the beach looking west with the continent behind me as the sun tracks down to the sea. I have my bearings …” (1993, 6). But this is not the experience of the characters in *Shallows* who are misshapen by the place, a “scar between two scrubby hills” (xi), that is shaped now by the legacy of the colonial hegemony. By the mid 1970s Angelus is beginning to feel the effects of poor management of both land and sea, and climate change – a phenomenon that is reflected in the troubled thoughts of many of the inhabitants.

No rain fell on the land at Wirrup, though sometimes water spouts and rain squalls were seen or imagined out over the sea as the weather passed. It was unnatural, as though God Himself steered the weather away. Every mile east from there the land was drier still and all but lifeless. Bushfires erupted in isolation. In the farthest recesses before the gazetted deserts, birds fell from the sky. There was no winter.

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141 Turner (1993) suggests that the whales signify seasonal change and the passing of time.

142 The white terrier was given to Manuk, a Noongar elder of high degree, by his friend Dr Cross, the killing of the dog signifying the shift of relationships between Noongar and Europeans on the ‘friendly frontier.’

143 Both Bolton (1981, pp. 37-49) and Seddon (1997, 160) detail examples of what architect Robin Boyd named “arboriphobia”/the hatred of trees. Ironically, in the search for much needed water, millions of trees were eradicated, contributing, we now know, to a reduction of rainfall in many areas.
This corresponds with observable climate change in Western Australia; in the mid 1970s there was a sharp drop in rainfall in the south-west of the state, and large-scale changes in atmospheric circulation patterns. In *Shallows*, Pell remembers the “safe sixties when the world’s problems didn’t exist, everyone seemed to have a job, when Aborigines were a bad memory from mission days.” He ruminates with the old farmer Coupar, and they both reflect on their own wounded lives that they know to be ending, saying,

‘This unearthly drought that’s got the weather chaps by the balls. They can’t explain a drought like this. …The noongas (sic) live like ghosts.’ (102 )

There are a lot of ghosts in Angelus. This is a place where, from the outset, Europeans were at odds with the landscape, revealed in Nathaniel Coupar’s journal entries of the 1830s. Reminiscent of Golding’s (1954) *Lord of the Flies*, Winton details the brutish treatment meted out to fellow human beings, both Aboriginal and European, as well as to whales and environment in general.

One hundred and fifty years later, Nathaniel’s miserable descendent laments his alienation and regret with no-one but himself to hear. In a confused and rambling monologue he recollects the violence of the past and recaps a life of regret; for his wife Maureen, “I treated her like a pack horse” and “wasted her heart”; for the “Abos”; and for the land. “Inheritance, Queenie, it’s a bugger,” he cries. But like successive generations, Queenie is not there, and cannot hear. Daniel’s stories are a site of return, for his own healing, but even more importantly for the generations that will follow him. What is the cost to the people of Angelus, if Daniel’s stories go unheard? In my reading, Winton reminds us of the role of the writer, that stories are also a site of change, a shifting ground that holds the traces of the past. While in the narrative the people of Angelus do not stop to listen, the readers of *Shallows* will hear his story.

Their inheritance haunts their lives. Even as Coupar thinks he has “come a long way” in his

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144 Winton has been criticised by Dixon (2005) and others for his conservatism and what is seen as his preoccupation with a nostalgic nationhood, but this overlooks the author’s consistently complex representation of history, cultural identity and belonging that point to the national myths of an ‘Australia’ as flawed.

145 Yunqiu Liu (2013, 5) has observed that Winton’s men, inarticulate as they are in company, often surprise with their sensitive monologues and memories. In contrast, Schurholz (2014,105) dislikes the way that Winton’s characters recentralise the “man-in-crisis” through confessional storytelling, for example in *Shallows* Daniel Coupar voices his pain and generational guilt in a passionate letter to Queenie, but does not act to fix things.

146 Sally Morgan’s (1989) *My Place* is a good example of the way that stories can be discounted and silenced and then are finally heard.

147 Griffiths (2014) points out that this is to see “inheritance” as what Jacques Derrida (1994, 45) calls, “spectrality”
recognition of what he and his family has done, the novel acknowledges that this is ‘too little too late’. At least he has learned enough to know that what he is bequeathing his granddaughter Queenie is a defiled baggage that she will have to reconcile. The traces of the past remain in the landscape–he feels the “bones underfoot”, and the dust as “dried blood”, remembering how people were “driven off the land, shot and beaten” and that his father “horsewhipped a man for wanting to walk on his old land again” (88). The places of Angelus are haunted: the church, the house, the farm, the town, the landscape and the sea hold and reveal (if anyone is taking notice), layers and layers of stories of what has constituted them, of what has gone before.

Veronica Brady suggests that for all of Winton’s characters, “space itself becomes a weight to be borne. … This pressure of place results in ‘passionate need’, a feeling of longing for something missing” (in Watzke 1993, 23). This may come some way to explain why the characters find it so difficult to articulate their stories. Voices too, are always emplaced; the weight of place bears down on their ability to express themselves, unsettling them, disconnecting them so that it is difficult for them to know where they are, and even if they belong. In the memory of each character there is a sense of shame, of loss, of haunting, including the diarist Nathaniel Coupar who knows of the violent rapes among the whalers toward their own and the Noongar women, but consoles himself that because he did not commit the rapes, merely witnessed them, he cannot be blamed, or need forgiveness.

Winton does not represent a place of unequivocal power; the colonizers do have a debt to pay. The characters are emplaced in wounded territory. Through their shame and grief, they reveal their sense of dislocation. But even so, they have the stories, and it is from their personal narratives that a bigger, collective story emerges. The ability to narrate is universal, an important consideration in postcolonial societies where hegemonic forces have marginalized and silenced the stories of those who do not have the power to be heard. Talking about healing the fractures of conflict, and forgiveness, and following Pierre Nora and Michel de Certeau, Ricoeur questions the nature and truth of historical knowledge and suggests that “we are under an obligation to seek truth before we are bound by a duty, by a debt of memory” (2003, 10).

that constitutes everything they are and will become. “If to inherit is to affirm an injunction, not simply a possession, but an assignation to be deciphered, then we are only what we inherit. Our being is inheritance, the language we speak is inheritance” (Derrida 2002, 25-6).

Thomas (2007) claims that maleness in the novel is synonymous with power, that the male characters feel vulnerable and uncertain when they cannot act dominantly.

In dialogue with the Romanian historian, Sorin Antohi (March 10, 2003).
In the journals, Nathaniel is unrepentant, arguing that, “A man is not responsible for his company. I suffered in resisting barbarity. I did not participate. I am innocent” (142). Years later, Daniel Coupar says with some contrition, ‘There are sins of inaction too, you know’ (79). But Winton shows how Coupar maintains “a safe and secret distance” from his perch set high above the harbour. In an attempt to conceal his ‘inheritance’, he edits the journals by tearing out the final pages, and despite urging Cleve to “read it properly” and “read it for the things that aren’t there” he feels guilty and shamed, and does not want the chilling and detached record of his forebear to be kept.150

The capacity for a change in habitual patterns of behaviour is thwarted by the dependence on the ‘leadership’ and ‘authority’ of the dominant discourses. Marks explains to Queenie the way that the whales will follow the pod leader anywhere, even to certain death. When they are beached you “can tow them right out to sea again and they’ll go right back in. … just throw themselves up and die. Unless you can kill the leader” (136). While not an exclusive reading, the whale stranding at the conclusion of *Shallows* suggests that despite Queenie and Cleve’s efforts to reverse the behaviour of the whales, their will is of no consequence– the whales cannot be turned from their own destiny. But Rodney Smith’s reading points to something else– “that humans and whales may be linked only by the possibility of a non-rational and pre-political surrender to life’s rhythms” (2006, 8), a state of “deep ecology” that the environmental activist Fleurier has promoted throughout the novel.151

In a seeming act of sacrifice, or at least atonement, the dying Daniel Coupar climbs into a cave of tangible childhood memories, hideous memories that he has forgotten. He holds vertebra, baleen, whale jaws, and the skulls of sheep that he had brought to the cave as a child. Then lighting a fire, he burns the journals of his forebear, as if by burning the words he can erase the memory, erase the past. “‘Here’s your bloody Blessing, Nathaniel Coupar. To know that I beg mercy for you and for me and ours. Why is it so hard to love? To fulfil the law?’” (256).

When Winton wrote *Shallows*, the *Bringing Them Home Report* (1997) and the National

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150 Bolton describes how Baudin’s warning in 1802 was not unfounded; sea elephants quickly vanished from Bass Strait and can now only be seen close to the Australian continent on Macquarie Island. In less than a decade after 1800, (as Governor King reported in 1805) 133,000 seal skins passed through the port of Sydney, just a small portion of the total kill (1981, 51).

151 In general terms, Deep Ecology argues for the inherent value, and essential inter-dependence of all living things to sustainable life, an important consideration when environmental systems are threatened. See Winton’s “Silent Country: Travels Through a Recovering Landscape” (2008) for the author’s account of the deteriorating “dead zone of the wheatbelt” and how that might be rehabilitated.
Reconciliation Convention were several decades away. As awkward as Winton’s depictions of Noongar people may seem in contemporary terms, where Indigenous self-determination, Native Title and reconciliation are established policies within the national agenda, it must be noted that *Shallows* was one of the first novels to reference matters of racial identity, and Australians’ relationship to the environment, matters that continue to trouble the nation.152

Winton considers Mowaljarlai one of Australia’s “greatest visionaries” and conducted a dialogue with the Ngarinyin elder that began in the early 1990s and spanned nearly two decades.153 On “The Law Report” Mowaljarlai explained that

> We all have symbols for land. And I don’t own the land, but the land owns me. That is the strong thing in Aborigine law and culture. It’s about the land. I’m only a servant, we all Aborigines are servants, we serve nature. That’s why it’s so important for us, because the land owns us. (ABC radio, 31 October, 1995)

In the novel, Marks says, “Man, I want my children to grow up to see whales; I want them to know their place. An ocean without whales is like a wilderness without trees” (137). But, despite resounding success in bringing back the whales through the cessation of commercial whaling in the region, since *Shallows* was published, wide-spread ‘development’ and poor resource management has gained even more momentum, the 1970s and 1980s being pivotal decades in which improved efficiency and economic rationalism was entrenched as being in the national interest.154 An agenda of true custodianship of land, as represented in Aboriginal law, continues to be secondary in the pursuit of ‘material’ wealth.

In his address to the Royal Academy, Winton describes his initial experiences of Paris in the 1980s, standing for the first time on the terrain of another continent and being “unsettled by gaps of language and history, of course”, but that he knew that his ‘home’ was irrevocably Australia. In what he sees as a singularly Australian experience, the author says that “space was my primary

152 Country is intrinsic to Noongar ‘law’, the wellbeing of the land and sea as important as any human requirement, individual or collective.
153 In 2006, Winton traveled with Hannah Rachel Bell and others as part of the Bush University Project in the Kimberley region of Western Australia, where he finally met Mowaljarlai in person. Mowaljarlai passed away in 1997.
154 In this paradigm, ‘efficiency’ and ‘conservation’ operate as competing forces. Under the Hawke Labor Government, the 1980s saw the introduction of economic liberalism and deregulation. See Lines (1991, 249) who cites the Premier Court’s West Australia as “The Land of Movable Mountains” and Bolton (1981, 172-173).
inheritance. … an impossibly open sky, dwarfing everything, imposing a pitiless correction on human perspective” (2013, np). It seems that he still views the continent in terms of its natural sounds and untouched landforms.

The characters in Shallows reveal an ambivalence towards the efficacy of environmental activism and the ability of this settler society on the Australian continent to embrace what Gammage (2011, 323) has identified as “being truly Australian” in a way that acknowledges and cares for the country. Winton seems more optimistic, claiming, “Patriotism has evolved to include a reverence for the land itself, and a passion to defend the natural world as if it were family” (2013, np).

In the novel the people of Angelus are ‘celebrating’ the town’s sesquincentennial; it is a time for taking account, for weighing up the past. Coupar says, “In dreams I go back into the past— it’s like a well— and change it all back around, make the past right again and then I wake up and I don’t exist anymore” (78). The clock cannot be turned back. The past is our inheritance, everything we are and will become. It is in the DNA that constitutes our bodies and of those we leave behind. It is in the geographical formations of this ancient landmass and the structures of the built environment. And it is in the stories.

To write: to try meticulously to retain something, to cause something to survive; to wrest a few precise scraps from the void as it grows, to leave somewhere a furrow, a trace, or a few signs. (Perec 1997, 92)

Ultimately, Winton’s mnemonic landscapes reveal the paradox inherent within the interconnection of remembering and forgetting, and the difficulty of apprehending the sense of place while there remains resistance to acknowledging and healing the fractures and wounds of the past. Exploring the work of memory and forgetting, Shallows is a trace, a few precise scraps that linger in the landscape. The novel points to the dialectical legacy of colonialism, and in my reading, the elusive quality of ‘truth’.
Chapter Five

Drylands: *Tourmaline* by Randolph Stow

How did our representations of the world become hard and dry?

(Carter 2009, 8)
Randolph Stow wrote “the environment of a writer is as much inside him as in what he observes” (1961, 4). In this chapter I consider the interrelationship of place and memory in *Tourmaline*, and the way the novel encapsulates the ambivalence toward, and fear of, the ‘outback’ commonly expressed in Australian literature. With this in mind, I examine the way Stow represents landscape in a novel that attempts to penetrate, or in some way secure the ‘silence’ of the desert, and to hold back the waves of sand that threaten to obliterate the town and all its memories. *Tourmaline* traverses both inner and outer landscapes, the novel reflecting the author’s belief that the boundary between an individual and his environment is not his skin. It is the point where mind verges on the pure essence of him, that unchanging observer that, for want of a better term, we must call the soul. (1961, 3)

I argue that understanding the inherent nature of language in the construction of both the sense of place and memory is intrinsic to any reading of Stow’s work. With this in mind, I consider the way in which childhood memory, as well as the author’s interest in anthropology and Taoism, permeate the novel. According to John Kinsella, “Stow loved language as a thing in itself” (2012, 12). This is significant because, paradoxically for a writer, *Tourmaline* attests to a distrust of words and an endorsement of silence.

In this chapter I also acknowledge Stow’s anti-nuclear stance and the novel’s account of land degraded by human activity. The apocalyptic tone that pervades the narrative can be read as either the result of atomic war, or of an Australia dealing with a legacy of ‘resource’ exploitation, or, in a 21st Century reading, of the continent in the grip of climate change.

Stow left Australia in the 1960s to go ‘home’ to the green and watery landscape of the south-

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155 In the same article, Stow is at pains to explain that artists cannot represent “the environment”, it must always be “my environment”, and that the representations of artists such as Drysdale and Nolan, however evocative of the Australian landscape, are still just the mindscapes of the artists (1961, 4). Winton noted that “I still revere Stow as probably my favourite Australian writer,” and his “sacred apprehension of matter, of country” (cited in Carey, 2013, 87).

156 William Grono and Dennis Haskell describe the novel as “a site for metaphysical exploration, a means of exploring the purpose of human existence” (2010, 1).

157 In Zen philosophy, “the eternal present is the ‘timeless,’ unhurried flowing of the Tao– *Such a tide as, moving, seems to sleep, Too full for sound or foam*” (in Watts, 1957, 200).

158 Stow points out: “I became a writer for two reasons. One was that in National service I first collided with the facts of life in the atomic age. The other was the death of a friend. … I felt it was necessary to do something creative and do it quickly” (in John Hetherington 1962, 245).

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east coast of England. Despite leaving Australia in his thirties (he returned briefly in 1974), he unfailingly references the place of his childhood in his work. John Kinsella argues that he was “obsessed with roots and belonging” which “he identified as part of the mythos of ‘Australian’ identifying/identification– the urge for nation” (2012, 19). Reflected in much of his writing, Geraldton and the mid-West hinterland and the Indian Ocean are now affectionately known as “Stow’s country”. On both sides of his childhood environs, violence was endemic in the remembered history of the very first recorded stories of European exploration by sea and land, and in the practical nature of ‘opening up’ the agricultural region in the removal of Indigenous inhabitants and the transformation of the natural environment to better meet the needs of colonial economic interests. A mood of isolation and alienation permeated his childhood. This dichoptic and unsettled sense of place, with its deep impression of displacement, infiltrates Stow’s work. Reflected not only in the themes and scenarios he pursues, but in the narrative techniques and a carefully chosen language that point to the dichotomous character of the settler imagination, the novel presents a view of imperialism and cultural alienation through a European lens. In the previous chapters I have argued that sense of place is made complex through its interconnections with memory and imagination, and that ‘landscape’ is a way of seeing informed by our cultural values and experience.

Known only as the Law, the first words we hear from the narrator in Tourmaline, as indeed the last words, gesture to the complications and deceits wrought by colonization. The novel opens with the following declaration:

I say we have a bitter heritage but that is not to run it down. Tourmaline is the estate, and if I call it heritage I do not mean that we are free in it. More truly we are tenants; tenants of shanties rented from the wind, tenants of the sunstruck miles. (7)

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159 Stow said he felt an “atavistic” attraction to the Suffolk countryside. “I don’t feel like a visitor here,” he said of Harwich in Essex where he lived out his final years (Carey 2013, 187).
160 See Gabrielle Carey (2013) for a detailed account of Stow’s early life there.
161 Impermanence and death is an inevitable facet of agriculture: “Lupins withered and foxes rotted, and the windmill whirled and whirled against all seasons of the sky, drinking from the filled dark caves below the earth,” Stow wrote in his autobiographical The Merry-go-round in the Sea (1965).
162 Stow wrote about the opposing myths of convict prison and bountiful Eden (in Hassall 1990, 411-12). His contemporary, Dorothy Hewett explained how as Western Australians, “the Nullarbor, that mythic desert place, and the long running tides of the Indian Ocean have guaranteed our isolation, our purity, and our paranoia” (1973, ix).
163 Carey suggests that as a young man Stow was “on a quest for meaning, belonging and authenticity, which meant he had to get away from the land of the lotus-eaters. He couldn’t just kick back, eat meat pies, swat flies and write a few poems” (2013, 187). See Gammage (2011) for a study of the impact of European land management on the Australian continent.
The author’s European/colonial subjectivity in respect to the displacement of the original inhabitants and the imposition of the colonial hegemony with all its trappings of mapping, social engineering and economic development is rendered in irony so as to make its meaning clear. The term ‘heritage’ can mean ‘inheritance’, ‘legacy’, ‘tradition’ and ‘birthright’. Deconstructing each of these words reveals haunted meanings that suggest opportunities for multiple readings of the novel that are not exclusive, but may exist as alternative means to understanding how landscape is represented in the novel. The sense of provisional habitation in the opening lines, of temporary, uncertain possession of the ‘estate’, abused by wind and sun, of desertification, infuses the novel. In an interview with John B. Beston, Stow said that he

dreamed a ballad, about a town called Tourmaline. … That’s the ballad more or less that’s sung by Byrne in the novel. What stimulated me most was the ghost townships of the Eastern Goldfields of Western Australia. (in Hassall 1990, 349)

Byrne, the town’s bard who, while representing the satanic (the novel evokes religious symbolism and much of the narrative takes place in the ruins of the church), also signifies, just as the Aboriginal singers do, the power of song in relation to the “land’s meaning”. Song is continually referenced in the novel, perhaps the author’s tribute to the disrupted Aboriginal songlines.

New Holland is a barren place,
in it there grows no grain,
nor any habitation
wherein for to remain. (13)

Even so, in the novel Stow’s evocations of the sense of place frequently reference the beauty and the possibilities that reside within the terrain, as well as the changes wrought on the country by the single-minded pursuit of gold. The Law, who has lived in Tourmaline for many years and narrates the story, walks across a dry salt lake and laments that there “is nothing on this planet more desolate”, explaining that in the good seasons of the past the lake was “so crowded with birds that they blacked the sun out, wheeling above the water” (159).

Kinsella (2012, 21) describes Stow’s writing as imbued with “the music of language” and Tourmaline as “superbly poetic”. See Fiona Richards (2013, 179) for a close reading of sound and music in Stow’s work, especially concerning his reference in Tourmaline to Scottish songs that are based on the poet Robert Burns and the way Byrne’s song serves as a leitmotif. Again, see Ong (2002) for the way oral traditions use mnemonic story telling to relate and maintain knowledge.
Indeed, even though it was an environment in which he could not live, the author returned time and again in both his prose and poetry to the landscape of Western Australia.\footnote{See Carey’s (2013) “An Ambivalent Australian” for more on Stow’s self-imposed exile.} According to Carey the “sense of groundedness, of being rooted in the particular, was hugely important to Stow, both physically and artistically” (2013, 198). But Stow’s reasons for living out his life in England point to a sense of dislocation in Western Australia, and his representations of the Australian landscape are difficult to reconcile if, as Gibson claims, being fully emplaced, attuned to a place, allows a knowing of the land “in much the same way that one can know the overall cohesion (or soul?) of one’s own body precisely because one is immersed in it” (1993, 473).

It is, therefore, important to remember that the bulk of Stow’s ‘Australian’ writing comes from memory. Kinsella (2012) suggests that the author’s insights into his own work are complex and cannot always be reconciled with what is known of his life, and indeed, as Roslyn Haynes claims, that in a further distancing from faithful representations of Australia, \textit{Tourmaline} is set in an imaginary future (1998, 202).

Stow’s ability to depict the landscape and impart the “land’s meaning” implies a grounded connection with Australia’s terrain. But while he may have carried childhood places within his memory, he was subjected to and the product of an ongoing, unsettled colonial experience. This, along with the dynamic quality of memory and the elusory nature of language, further means that his representations of the land should be read with this displacement in mind.\footnote{Bernadette Brennan argues for a reading of the deeply poetic and silent \textit{Tourmaline} in terms of the politics of fear (2004, 143-157).} In the absence of the synaesthetic facility of embodiment, there is a capacity to forget places, or to remember them through a distorted lens.\footnote{Nevertheless, Kinsella describes Stow’s writing as “Groundbreaking, historic, and essential … haunting, lyrical, mythical, spiritual and anchored in place” (2012, 9).} As Kinsella also points out, Stow’s writing is a “prime case of what Hodge and Mishra have called ‘paranoid’ reading …” (2012, 9-10), including the haunting and ghostly attributes of the gothic and the uncanny. Despite his claims to realism in his writing, Stow’s early novel, \textit{A Haunted Land} (1956), attests to his abiding interest in unsettling, gothic representation, and that in his eyes, the Australian landscape is ‘strange’ country.

Nevertheless, even if they are unable to experience a peaceful life themselves, as in \textit{Tourmaline}, where all of the characters embody a sense of dislocation and loss, significant characters in Stow’s writing either intuit or learn that the land has its own meaning, and that there must be
harmony with the rhythm of the land (Tiffin 1978, 86). Within the ever-changing, enfolding physicality of land there exists a meaning that is at once personal and universal. This implies an ‘unearthing’ of the land’s meaning that is not readily achieved within the confines of human activity, that requires an apprehension of place as ‘memoryscape’ with “particular emphasis of places as remembered places” (Nuttall, 1992, 54). In this way, stories (of which the Aboriginal songs are paramount) are embedded and inseparable from the formation of the earth, and from how landscape is viewed and represented.

Stow’s earliest writing signifies this consilience of putting into words the dimensions of the physical landscape and the sense of the past. But a ‘memoryscape’ implies to some extent continuity of geographical form and cultural representation, both commonly disrupted during the process of colonization. Is this abiding interest in connecting with the land a yearning for harmony, a longing to be at home in the world that is ultimately not possible given Stow’s subjectivity within the social and cultural milieu of a parochial Australian community where he did not feel at home? I argue that his experience of the Australian environment, including memory and imagination, is uncanny in the sense that for Stow, a mingling of both the familiar and the unfamiliar was paradoxical, a ‘love/hate’ bond with his birth country.

Throughout Tourmaline, the Law’s reminiscences are fragmented and muddled with his dreams and imaginings, and in his so-called ‘memory’ of the former glory of Tourmaline are the regretful ramblings and nostalgic longings that point to postcolonial binaries and a questionable version of the history of the place being so faithfully recorded. The digressions and deviations that constitute the narrative of the novel, and the ongoing interruption of the telling resonate with the uncanny of the historical past. While this uncanniness may be dispelled over time through a familiarization of the country, the people of Tourmaline are in the main overwhelmed by their fear; of losing all the aspects of their lives they remember as theirs, and of apprehending anything that is not part of their remembered narrative.

The extreme climate and desolate nature of the terrain intensifies their sense of the uncanny; outside of Tourmaline “the uncanny reigns unchallenged” and “the world extend[s] vast and unknown” (Armellino, 2009,73-4). Pilar Baines (2012,3) draws a parallel between the castle in

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169 The poem points to Stow’s recognition that the “landscape is personal and tribal history made visible” (Yi-Fu Tuan 1977,157).
170 Perhaps reconciliation can be found, as Ricoeur suggests, in the “gradual familiarization with the unfamiliar”
Gothic literature and the Black Hole as “a place of no return, variable and turbulent territories characterised by ambiguity, fluidity and power,” an analogy that dovetails with the town of Tourmaline and which brings symmetry in its allusion to a ‘Black Hole’ in space.171

When transplanted onto an entirely different geography with its own history, the nature of the colonial experience with its introduced system of law, government and religion that evolved in the geography and history of another place, is inherently alienated and ‘out of place’ with the rhythms of the new land.172 Tiffin suggests one reading of Tourmaline is that it is a myth-dream, creating a watered, green environment in the desert so as to “return it to unity out of the cultural confusions and the dryness of the present” (1981,113).

It is as if the Law has trained himself not to see.173 Like many characters in the novel, he wants only to believe the façade he has been taught through the hegemony, never wholly emplaced, resisting feeling the place and therefore unable to truly know it. Is he dreaming, imagining or remembering this landscape? What is its true character of this place that is embodied in the novel? Moreover, how much of what the narrator says can be relied upon?

Despite Stow’s attempts at realism in the evocation of the Australian desert and portrayal of the devastation wrought by European economic imperatives, Tourmaline is “less a tangible reality than a country of the mind” (Brennan 2004, 145). Insular, cut off from the rest of the country, the town is parched and broken. Stow unambiguously represents the destructive forces provoked by the fear of the ‘other’, of ‘false gods’, materialist greed and most especially, the dire consequences of the inability to fully inhabit a place, to hear what it has to say, to hear the silence. His representation of place in Tourmaline is of a landscape corrupted and degraded, where the inhabitants have failed in their obligations as the land’s custodians. In the pursuit of gold, they have stripped the country of its natural resources, including the most precious resource of all, water.

Silence is empire
Tao is eternal,

that brings closer together the “history taught in school and the experience of memory” (2004, 411).

171 This idea of Tourmaline as a ‘Black Hole’ can also be applied to the fictional towns of “Allbut” in Thea Astley’s (1982) An Item From the Late News and “Outer Maroo” in Oyster by Hospital (1996), for example.
172 See Tiffin (1981) for a full analysis of how the notion of cargo cult infiltrates Stows thinking in relation to the colonial context.
173 Except perhaps with “his eyes blurred maps/of landscapes still unmapped/in myth we named for each other,
flowering, returning,
with water, with silence.\textsuperscript{174}

The Aboriginal elder, Gloria, who is living in the ruins of the church, prays, “‘Make it rain, dear God.’”\footnote{XVI “from The Testament of Tourmaline: Variations on Themes of the Tao Teh Ching”.} When the Law ask her what will happen when God comes she unhesitatingly replies, “‘Water … Kangaroo, duck, everything. People pretty hungry in the camp now’” (77). And after she has described the ritual offerings she places on the altar, she goes on to say, “‘Only me. I come. No one else love God now. They all forget.’” In this way Stow alludes to the vast resource of Indigenous knowledge that has been ‘forgotten’, erased in the colonial conquest for the land. “‘Everyone? Everyone forgets?’” the Law asks, naming the cyclical nature of the human condition epitomized in the song form of the novel. Should God answer Gloria’s prayers and deliver rain, it seems certain that the exploitation and abuse will begin again, the desire for water signifying the human craving for security and permanence.

A once prosperous goldmine, delivering all the material wealth of their dreams, has left the town of Tourmaline waterless and without a future—unable to break the deadlock, the people welcome into their midst an outsider upon whom they fix all their despair and their hope. The angelic newcomer, who gives his name as Michael, is heralded as a diviner who promises to find water by powers of divination, and also, it is believed, gold.\footnote{Dutton (1966, 141) identifies “the outsider, bystander, the outrider, the stranger” as an important theme in Stow’s novels.} The residents of Tourmaline, desperate for anything to believe in, to hold on to, claim him as a messiah who has the power to save them.\footnote{It is clear that Stow drew on his knowledge of Melanesian cargo cults as well as on his knowledge of} As McDougall explains, the Law draws attention to the cultural schizophrenia of a nation that is only a name, where conscience and memory are fragmented, pathetically blinded: on the one hand by a forlorn hope that from the desert the prophets will come, and on the other … by a hopeless nostalgia for the green world. (1990, 131)\footnote{It is clear that Stow drew on his knowledge of Melanesian cargo cults as well as on his knowledge of}

In \textit{Tourmaline}, distinctions between past and present disintegrate within the diverse narrative
forms that undermine the chronology of unitary, linear time, privileging a sense of timelessness, of mythical time that has no beginning and no end. Memory is a constant shadow in the text, ordering the past from a present perspective but both connecting and directing the narrative in an illusory mirage-like, cyclical account of the place. It teases, too, with notions of silence, muteness and disengagement with the physical outer world, a searching for inner stillness and silence that cannot be articulated in language.\(^{178}\) In keeping with the author’s interest and commitment to Taoist philosophy, there is a persistent yearning to return to oneness in Stow’s representations of the home state. Disrupting the absence and silence, the multiple voices whisper on the wind, intimating, he implies, that all life is one.

Within the poetics of his writing, sense of place and sense of spirit are intertwined, inseparable—“the skeletal obelisks of headless windmills”, the “toppling masts” of the goldmines … all the history of Tourmaline is here. Like an archaeologist I can distinguish the different layers of our culture” (161). Throughout the novel, the natural environment is represented as a living entity greatly feared by the people who live in the place.\(^{179}\)

In this way, cultural allegiance through the particularizing quality of language transforms places, attributing features, inscribing them with meanings (Casey 1993, 31). Once land has been represented in stories, it is no longer land but landscape. It has been translated, imbued with meanings, signified and possessed. “There is no such thing as a pristine landscape. There may be an image of pristinity (or of beauty, or of innocence, etc.), but such a thing cannot mean anything outside cultural systems” (Gibson 1992, 75; original emphasis). The cultural narratives attached to the land denote how it is represented in its multiple forms as landscape.

Ricoeur asserts that “[e]ven at the individual level it is through stories revolving around others and around ourselves that we articulate and shape our own temporality” (2004, 6). As the storyteller, known only as ‘the Law’, labours over his task he draws from the past the stories he has heard as well as from his own memory. Tourmaline is always a haunted place, unsettled, a place of unbelonging and his role as narrator is complicated—*to know where to begin, to know which story to

Christianity in his depiction of the diviner (Tiffin, 1981,112).

\(^{178}\) Wright suggested that a feature of Stow’s writing was that it seeks to “reach beyond words into a kind of post-human wholeness” (in Zwicky, 1983, 43).

\(^{179}\) Dutton claims that the landscape in Stow’s novels is not a backdrop but “as integral to character as, say, in Hardy” (1966, 140). His article (1966) on Stow’s work provided a contrary perspective in the midst of such critics as Leonie Kramer and still offers important insights today.
tell. He struggles with the incommunicable nature of the sense of place, the limitation of words and how they tie things up while never reaching their mark, how they qualify in binary oppositions, and fall short of what needs to be said.

In the pursuit of ‘truth’, how to name the unnameable, how to convey the limitless, multi-stranded events, the ghostly voices—this is at the heart of the novel. The narrator senses, but cannot effectively articulate, what he knows to be lost. This is not to say that words, through his daily habit of recording memories and events, do not have importance, and although he does not physically leave, words take him on a quest, a journey into the memories and imaginaries of the past. Articulating the country beyond the ‘civilization’ of the town, the Law writes about “that danger of which I know nothing, but which drives me night and morning to prayer, and fills my sleep with images of wind and annihilation” (36). At the end of his chronicle, he speaks of that “original sin, that began when a man first cried to another, in his matted hair: Take charge of my life, I am close to breaking” (174). Evocative of the poem, “The Land’s Meaning” with its “report back from the edge and beyond,” Tourmaline asks us “are we like the poet, too afraid to take the leap into the unknown silence?” (Kinsella 2012, 36).

The town of Tourmaline is difficult to pin down. It lies off the map, just beyond the reach of the usual words and images. The Diviner, for example, “had been so far, so far, in country never mapped, on the border-lands of death” (15). It is “a town of corrugated iron, and in the heat the corrugations shimmer and twine, strangely immaterial”(7-8). Perhaps it is even a mirage. There is a physical and temporal distance in the detached narration through the old man. He knows his time is over, that with the death of the old regime, rising from the ruins, must come a new order. But whether the town exists, even in its ruined state, or is simply the reminiscences of a raving old man looking back after a nuclear holocaust, is never made clear. Dutton contends that even though Tourmaline is a mirage-town, so immaterial, it is extraordinarily memorable, “like Sidney Nolan’s paintings where the shapes of men or buildings hover insubstantially over the earth behind them” (1966, 145). 

The narrator, however, assures us that it “is not a ghost town. It simply lies in a coma. This

180 Nolan was friend and collaborator—see for example the poetry collection Outrider (1962) and the cover of Tourmaline (1963). Stow admired Drysdale and Nolan: “the external forms filtered back through the conscious and unconscious mind; that is what artists convey, and what I would hope to convey if I were capable of executing all I can conceive” (1961, 3).
may never end” (8). It is a town, Stow seems to be suggesting, that cannot be summarily dismissed as not existing, and because of that, the story too cannot be written off as a mirage, but should be read as something solid, even real.\footnote{181} We are not told, and not sure what ‘truth’ to believe, except the ‘truth’ that it has all happened before, in a cycle of materialization and decay, life and death.

The desert landscape depicted in the novel reaches across time and the Law is defined only in relation to the place, offering a construction of his ongoing struggle with the past. In this way, McDougall suggests that in 
\textit{Tourmaline}, the narrator “is subtly reconstituted through the process of his own fiction, re/membering himself through a ‘testament’ of imagination …” (1990, 138). But it is an important role, signifying the law, the narration and, in an apocalyptic reading, perhaps the only human still standing.

But while the Law is the (self-appointed) historian and the one to write down the story, he is far from being a credible witness. As the town’s policeman, he writes in the colonial language and represents its discourses. In the circumstances, his version of history, his story cannot be seen in any way to represent the stories of the ‘other’, especially the Aboriginal survivors who still inhabit the region.\footnote{182} If, as McDougall does, the novel is read as post-nuclear holocaust, the Law is the only survivor, crying out, “But what is Tourmaline? And where? I am alone. I write my testament for myself to read. I will prove to myself there has been life on this planet” (10).

Rejuvenation of life is in contrast to the trope of death, and the end of life that pervades the novel. For example, on the same day that Michael Random arrives in Tourmaline, the Aboriginal elder, Billy Bogada, dies in the native camp. According to the Law, the death “was not one of importance”\footnote{9}(9). But of course it is, as it signifies the end of millennia of Indigenous knowledge and management of the natural environment, and a future where the land’s life-sustaining resources, especially water, have been exploited for a few handfuls of gold.

David Fonteyn offers another reading; that while the arrival of the Diviner on the day of the

\footnote{181} Australia is not a rich source of the crystalline boson silicate mineral known as tourmaline. Did Stow name the town Tourmaline with irony, or because the gem is considered to have magical powers? The stones can change colour depending on the light source. No two tourmalines are alike.

\footnote{182} Although Stow does not explicitly reference it, the so-called Native Police were employed by the governments of the day to ‘open up the country’ and through unabashed violence, were instrumental in clearing Indigenous people from their lands to make way for the pastoral industry. The last recorded massacre of Aboriginal people in Western Australia by a police patrol was at Oombulgurri (Forrest River) in May 1926 (See Neville Green, 2008).

\footnote{183} Protocols for mourning are well established in Aboriginal communities and it is very unlikely the death of an
Aboriginal elder’s death can be seen as a synecdoche of the colonial destruction of the Indigenous people … part of the ‘bitter heritage’… the allegory presents an alternative meaning to this colonial heritage where its acknowledgement becomes the point from which a renewed dialogue between the Indigenous and non-Indigenous people and a shared future is possible. (2010, 5)

He goes on to argue that the trope of song gestures to a transformation and the opportunity to embrace the environment without changing it and that “the real wealth lies in the acceptance of the land as it is” (Fonteyn 2010, 11). The power of song notwithstanding, emplacement is a multi-faceted event, encompassing all the binaries of belonging, identity and expression manifested in place and in memory. Given the inexorable belief within the colonizing manifesto of material ‘progress’ through mining and the development of Western Australia’s natural resources, and the continuing oppression of Indigenous people in terms of their health and wellbeing in the areas of poverty, homelessness, imprisonment, it is difficult to see this as a plausible reading. While there is the potential to transcend the physical experience of place in the absence of words through song/music, this seems extremely unlikely in Tourmaline within the existing milieu, signified in the entrepreneurial publican Kestrel’s determination to restore the town’s economic prosperity. Moreover, the conflicted nexus between ‘Western’ agency and Taoist, or Australian Aboriginal acceptance remains unresolved as long as we want to sustain life on the land.

Stow saw liberation of the spirit as possible but difficult, to be found in silence rather than speech. While he is able to evoke a vivid sense of a real and geographically located place in his writing, his characters emplaced in tangible environments with specific features, the place always has deeper psychological and philosophical implications. Casey’s (2013, 26-27) ideas that point to the complicating and indeterminate qualities of imaginal and memorial margins; the possibility inherent in imagination and the haunting quality of memory, are useful in uncovering the value of the elder would not be treated with intense grief and the utmost respect.

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184 What is sometimes referred to as “Stow’s Country” is in fact Yamatji country. The poet Charmaine Papertalk Green represents the contemporary lives of Aboriginal people in the area in ways that suggest dislocation and disruption to traditional cultural expression.

185 In 1958 Stow studied anthropology and linguistics at the University of Sydney and the following year worked, mainly in the Trobriand Islands, as an assistant anthropologist and cadet patrol officer. He contracted malaria and had to return to Australia. Around this time he developed an interest in Indigenous spirituality and later, affinity with Taoism.
vagueness and fluidity that are revealed within Stow’s attempts to communicate what may indeed be incommunicable.

Negotiating the borders of the inner and outer worlds is the territory of all novelists; drawing on memory and imagination, excavating the voices and identities that guide the author to the emergence of the story. What seems to be Stow’s intention, to reveal the story from within the ‘silence’, to depict the activity of the colonizing project through ‘inaction’ poses practical challenges. In contrast to the colonial imperative in Australia to control the environment, to manipulate and transform it so that it could both function within the global economy and appear to be European, Lao Tzu’s philosophy expressed in the *Tao Te Ching* is one of non-action and silence. Tiffin argues an association between Christian ethics and metaphysics and the aggressive actions of the British settlers that facilitated the historical and emotional alienation of “the usurper from the ways of the land, and from the right perception of ‘the land and its meaning’” (1978, 85). Stow gestures to the contradiction inherent in the desire for silence and the need for words in order to represent the landscape, and draws attention throughout the novel to the destructive nature of human endeavour. In the novel, Tom Spring and Dave Speed articulate a quiet Taoist philosophy of inaction and silence that is juxtaposed with the diviner’s hard-line Christianity and Kestrel’s aggressive ambitions to control the wealth of the town; “‘Words are no good. Words are crap. Throw ‘em away and think,’” they urge the uncomprehending narrator (121).

Even so, the author presses on with ‘words’ to offer stories that do provide the reader with an intimate view of his sense of place. While Tom Spring’s attempts to explain Taoist philosophy go unheeded by the Law, they nevertheless provide the reader with a possible key to the novel, and an alternative template for a harmonious relationship with the land. In response to the townspeople’s dogged dependence on the success of the Diviner, Dave Speed says, “If the water comes, it’ll be when we’ve stopped needing it.” There is enough water for survival, even in the surrounding desert, but this fact is lost in the hunger to regain Tourmaline’s lost wealth and status. “Man will destroy himself if he remains imprisoned in his history”, warns the Tao (Tiffin, 1978, 103).

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186 The form of the novel in literary modernism has itself been linked to the time-frame of the Western colonising project (see Graham Huggans (2007, 85).
187 Stow once said when asked how an interview had gone, “Oh, good. I don’t think he got a thing out of me!” (cited Grono and Haskell, 2010).
188 Carey suggests that “Stow’s silence doesn’t appear to have been an unfriendly one. His temperament and philosophical bent point towards a faith in silence and deep doubt about language” (2013, 204).
189 Dry years notwithstanding, the knowledge and maintenance of water sources were necessarily key elements in Indigenous land management practices.
Tourmaline stands for so much more than a relic of a gold mining boom. In the colonial paradigm, Australia is both ‘new’ but at the same time always in the throes of decay and ruin. In the geographic paradigm, the landscape is in a constant process of shift and change. But, unlike many representations of the Australian ‘outback’, Stow continually draws attention to the once lush, productive country that has, through human endeavours, now become a drought-stricken, barren wasteland.

The novel describes what the land once was and what it has become. So even as Stow strives to traverse the esoteric states of silence and non-action, there is an attempt to ground the novel firmly in a particular location. If, as Casey’s work has argued, there is no knowing/sensing a place except through embodiment, that memory is essentially the ‘in-gathering’ of actual experience and imagination is predicated on possibility, then I argue that Stow’s representations of the desert locale are drawn from both memory of his early life on the driest continent on Earth, and from his imaginative work within the postcolonial milieu with all of its abiding concerns with emplacement and displacement.

The quest for meaning, including that of belonging in the ‘new’ land, is a consistent theme taken up by writers who are settler-descendants. Given that the ‘old’ land, with its contrasting geography, history and language is not equipped to provide the necessary trappings to interpret a place of such difference, Tiffin explains that Stow’s interest in both Aboriginal and Eastern religion is “in a sense an inevitable product of historical circumstance. The transplantation of a people from one environment to a vastly different one demands a metaphysical reordering of major proportions” (1981, 109).

While Stow does not have any answers, Tourmaline gestures to the displacement of Indigenous people from their country, as well as depicting the colonial machinations of European dominance of the landscape and an almost universal disregard for the extensive knowledge of the local people. And in a post-apocalyptic reading, the testing of atomic bombs along the north west coast of Western

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190 I undertook a fieldtrip through the Eastern goldfields where the novel is set that imparted an undeniable sense of a land laid waste; mine tailings, the remnants of tin shacks that had made up the town, the country of the traditional custodians appropriated and scarred in the pursuit of gold, (and uranium, bauxite, and iron ore) is manifest, the promised economic wealth not so evident, presumably benefiting lives elsewhere.
191 Tiffin (1981, 109) argues that when the colonising project does not respect the cultural affiliations of the Indigenous people the “psycho-spiritual trauma is shared by interloper and indigene alike.”
192 Absence is a ghost in Tourmaline; apart from no water, there is a dearth of animal and plant life, and the Indigenous inhabitants cling to the ruins of the town.
Australia and down into the Maralinga grounds is a further testimony to how Indigenous presence in the region was discounted.\footnote{For a comprehensive account of how Aboriginal communities were impacted, including their removal from country, by atomic testing see Cleared Out: First Contact in the Western Desert (2005). See Len Beadell’s Blast the Bush (1967) for an account of atomic testing carried out in Australia between 1956-1963.}

The Geraldton hinterland where Stow spent his childhood was, like many rural areas of Australia, the site of killings, removals and erasure of Aboriginal people. Although these events were rarely recorded, rarely talked about within the white community, they are in the living memory of local people, or at least in the recent history. Aboriginal people who were witness relocated at a safe distance to reserves outside the town boundaries, marginalized bodily along with their stories.

But Stow’s family were of pioneering stock, sheep graziers and pastoralists, and like many people living in these regions during the 1950s and 1960s, he was well aware of what had, and was still, happening.\footnote{Rather poignantly, and I suggest, acknowledging the long history of Aboriginal people on the Australian continent, Stow told McGregor, “My ancestors would have walked along here going from one farm to the other. Everywhere one goes one is stepping in well-worn paths. … When it comes down to it, it is one’s own ethnic past that connects one to the earth … you don’t have to excuse yourself anymore.”} Carey (2013, 207) cites his friends from Harwich, Hugh and Deborah; “My understanding,” said Hugh, somewhat timidly, “was that Randolph didn’t like Australia because he didn’t like the way they treated the indigenous people.”\footnote{In Tourmaline Stow makes reference to ‘gin jockeys’ (68) and in the poem, “Country Children”, (Act One 19), each stanza opens with “Country children know more than they know;” about the harsh realities of life and death including the iniquitous colonial hegemony.} According to Kinsella (2012, 23), the degree of racism in Australia “cannot be overstated.” He astutely describes the condition as “patronizing when quiet, and overtly hostile to Indigenous people at its more vocal and physical.”

In the novel, the Law is haunted by an uncanny childhood memory of a “hideous, pathetic, ludicrous negress with a pitcher on her shoulder” (84) that Bernadette Brennan (2004, 149) points out in an Australian context can most obviously be read in terms of “its allegorical implications for the European invasion of Australia and continued repression by ‘white’ Australia of the Aboriginal ‘other’.”

Influential on Stow’s poetry, Wright grappled with conflicted emotions about her relationship with the country in which she grew up: “These two strands- the love of the land we have invaded, and the guilt of the invasion- have become part of me.” Merrill Findlay suggests that “For settler-
descendants, there is no escaping such discontinuities regardless of how deeply bonded we may feel to the land we now occupy. Our relationship with ‘country’ can never be equivalent to that of Indigenous Australians” (2008, 17).

Stow was a writer before his time, but equally a writer of his time. Whether he was seeking or escaping in his quest for silence is difficult to know, only that his vision of the Australian landscape was haunted, unsettled by the knowledge of colonialism and tormented by the legacy of the cannibalizing imperatives of the Empire. Did he see what was coming? Brennan (2004) suggests that by referencing the philosophy of non-action and silence he may be deliberately choosing a non-directed, open-ended reading that signifies hope. The author’s yearning for silence can be read as a gesture to the eternal cycle of birth, death, and rebirth and Stow’s testament in Tourmaline might be read as the fulfillment of the Tao:

Deep. Go deep
As the blossoming myall.
Silence is lifeblood;
returning, flowering.

But our capacity in the future is connected to our capacity to come to terms with the past. His writing intersects the borders of both inner and outer landscapes in such a way as to make them appear inseparable. After the apocalypse, when the mnemonics intrinsic to place are obliterated, whose memories will survive? And what will become of us? The Law tells us that

the bell, up on the hill, kept tolling. Purposeless; moved by the wind. There was no town, no hill, no landscape. There was nothing. Only myself, swimming through the red flood, that had covered the world and spared me only. Of all those who had been there. (174)

The subjectivity of the narrator points to the end of all those who have been there—the prospectors’ misapprehension of the sense of the place they are colonizing has disrupted the capacity

196 “O men of little weight/ In the memory of these lands : O gens de peu de poids dans/ La memoire de ces lieux...” (Anabase). Stow greatly admired St-John Perse and chose this epigraph for Tourmaline.
197 Myall is a wattle plant adapted to arid (harsh) conditions. See Kerry Leves (2010) for an analysis of reference to flowers/flowering in Stow’s writing.
of memory to mediate “between mind and world” (Casey 1987, 141). But Stow’s enfolding and open
text gestures to what is hidden, the traces that linger in the landscape, waiting to be unearthed. Like
the narrative, the place is labile, not a fixed point on the map. The author’s quest for silence, even
wordlessness, is paradoxically subverted in Tourmaline. After the apocalypse, when all that existed
in the place is gone, there are, after all, “a few precise scraps from the void as it grows” (Perec, 1997,
92). There are the stories.
Chapter Six

Deadheart: A Sense of Place in Janette Turner Hospital’s *Oyster*

… these hidden matters are so legion that they populate the desert spaces quite thickly, they sigh and leer and whisper and flaunt themselves, they fill sleep with a crowd of witnesses, they appear and disappear and reappear in such a way that even after a fugitive has safely reached nowhere, even after he has preened himself on his absolute exit from the map of his life he will never feel secure. At night, he will hear the soft slither of the past … these messages seeping into the water table, drop by slow distant drop, leaking from memories and locked files on the other side of the decade, of the country, of the world, seeping into the great subterranean places where all the waters and all the memories meet and wash together. A man with a past to hide can hear the soft splash of evidence far below him, a thin but detectable stream polluting the Great Artesian Basin, bubbling and roiling away down there, its temperature increasing under pressure, its will to erupt growling and growing. It is biding its time. It is waiting to blow. It is waiting only for a new bore to be sunk, a new vent, a new opening, and then it will announce itself in a savage, showy, scalding explosion.

People who flee to nowhere are always waiting for retribution to catch up with them.

*(Oyster, 275)*
This chapter examines the novel *Oyster* and considers the manner in which memory and cultural identity are formed and maintained through narrative. With this in mind, I explore Hospital’s writing in terms of her interest in the way power is mediated and resisted through language. I also discuss the heteroglossic and polyphonic qualities of *Oyster* that are transparently demonstrated in the use of language and narrative form. The characters in the novel appropriate the words and expressions of others, and gesture throughout to the way language is deeply implicated in what is remembered and what will be forgotten.

Themes of memory, displacement and the evocation of a sense of place pervade the writing of Hospital. In *Oyster*, place is haunted and apocalyptic. The characters’ memories, like the volatile environment in which they find themselves, are constantly shifting and enfolding. Never settled, place and memory, like the narrative itself, are entwined in a state of uncertainty and change.

David Callahan claims that Hospital’s work “self-consciously privileges sites and moments of tension in which the operations of memory and its reconstruction are placed in question” (1996, 73). Attentive to the complexities of identity, especially within the context of displacement and cultural dislocation, Hospital’s characters inhabit borderlands where place and identity intertwine; their lives assert a troubled ambivalence brought about through their dislocation. Permeable and unstable, her borders deride any attempt to stabilise and control, or to map and define. Identity and its representation, are brought into an uneasy focus, and, according to Callahan, provide “fulcrums that problematize both sides, both possible directions, and thus render identity as already displaced” (1996, 73).

The recurring tropes of dislocation, the search for dependable memory, and the significance of representation are foremost in *Oyster*. Set in contemporary, postcolonial Australia, the novel’s terrain is of a disfigured landscape and a diverse cast of dislocated characters.

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198 There is an interesting symmetry between Hospital’s writing that traverses borders and dwells within the margins and Bakhtin’s suggestion in *The Dialogic Imagination* that “The word lives, as it were, on the boundary between its own context and another, alien, context” (1981, 284).

199 In an interview with Belinda McKay, Hospital recalls her childhood in Queensland: “When you grow up in a fundamentalist world you actually grow up in a mythic narrative space because everything in the Old Testament has immediate relevance and you read it at the dinner table, so in a way you grow up in a timeless space. ... Every Sunday you are told that you are living in the end of time. There’s always this feeling that at any moment God is going to put mankind to account ...” (2010, 25).

200 I would argue that all of Hospital’s ‘Australian’ writing is characterized by the gothic ‘uncanny’. See Hospital’s (2008) interview with Dominique Wilson for an insight into the author’s sense of ‘home’ and her experience of dislocation.
Frequently bound up in representations of the landscape, Australian writing commonly points to a sense of exile, with the natural environment seen as a threat to be conquered or possessed.\textsuperscript{201} \textit{Oyster} interrogates two familiar tropes represented in Australian literature, of a ‘home’ far from Australian shores, and the ‘alienating’ drylands of the centre. Callahan (2009, 241) suggests that Hospital’s writing has shown that “destablising the certainties of place … in which the feeling of home paradoxically begins with absence”, as in the case of an expatriate or exile, forces a comparison with “the state of being not at home.” As in the short story “Litany for the Homeland”, her characters are prone to insist that it is “[i]n margins and in longings: this is where all homelands begin” (2003, 257), and to ask, “Who decides what is margin and what is text? Who decides where the borders of the homeland run?” (2003, 266). Selena Samuels suggests that “Hospital often evokes place in the form of a representation of ‘home’, which is located in memories: the memories of Hospital’s characters and of the writer herself” (1996, 85).

Although the place of her childhood looms large in much of Hospital’s work the author’s sense of place and her relationship with Australia is complex and far from straightforward.\textsuperscript{202} In an interview with Donald Greiner, she says, “I guess it’s still true that I’m home in many places but don’t quite belong anywhere,” but she also claims that she “still inhabits those [Queensland] landscapes: my sensory memories of them are intense” (2010, 336). Salient to my discussion in this chapter, however, is the fact that she is unfamiliar with the degraded landscape of central Queensland. Her memories are of the lush tropical rainforests and coastal regions, while the landscape of the ‘outback’ depicted in \textit{Oyster} is represented as entirely treeless and waterless.\textsuperscript{203}

Nevertheless, and perhaps even more so because of Hospital’s dislocation, identity and how it is represented is strengthened by the imaginative and material past, in this case her childhood experiences in Queensland, as both the geographical and symbolic character of place acts to anchor memory. Significantly though, with the exception of the Murris, the characters in \textit{Oyster} are transitory in the sense of unsettled and displaced; they do not have a solid, grounded connection with

\textsuperscript{201} Samuels (1996, 86) claims that the stories set in Australia are “her most effective” but this is hardly surprising given that it is typical of most of Hospital’s works to encompass some aspect of the Australian landscape, both physically and psychically, and that, as Samuels also acknowledges, evocations of the Australian geographical and cultural landscape might well resonate within the memory of Australian readers.

\textsuperscript{202} Revealing something of her upbringing, Hospital has said that the stimulus for \textit{Oyster} was an unexpected awareness of “the collision between an idea and a visual setting, a landscape’– the “idea” being sociopathic religious fanaticism, with the “landscape” the Australian outback (Greiner, 2007, 381).

\textsuperscript{203} Hospital has little embodied experience of the ‘outback’, saying, “For \textit{Oyster}, I realized there were too many details I didn’t know. I have to experience the landscape viscerally. … I didn’t know the Outback” (in Greiner 2010, 340). To research \textit{Oyster}, Hospital made a trip to the interior of Queensland and met people there.
the place. They are still, however, emplaced there, and despite their sense of dislocation, the desert environment exerts powerful symbolic and physical influence on how they think, feel and behave.\(^{204}\)

In the case of exiles and expatriates, emplacement is commonly experienced as comparison, with reference to the “other”, places that have been imbedded in memory. Samuels (1996,1) contends that Hospital’s preoccupation with the past and past places is “an inevitable aspect of the fiction of an exile or expatriate”, a trope that is evident in Oyster through the gallery of displaced characters who are seeking a sense of ‘home’ in a landscape that alienates and indeed obliterates them, or who long to leave the place and go ‘home’. Only the Murris seem to be going nowhere, but rather are waiting patiently on the margins for the ‘other’ to leave so that they can get on with the business of creating a viable existence in the country of their forebears.\(^{205}\)

But the past is not easily reconciled. Any reading of Hospital’s work that considers place and memory demands attention to our own subjectivity; whose voices are we hearing, and what is the underlying discursive function intrinsic to the meanings of the stories? Descriptions of Queensland as marginalized and lost, a geographical ‘other’, characterize much of Hospital’s work. There is a sense of vast distance, of miles of outback and uncharted land powerfully evoked. And just as the oyster of the title is formed by a process of accretion, Hospital fashions the characters from their own thoughts, fears and desires, connecting words, intentions, actions and memories.\(^{206}\)

_Caveat viator:_ let the traveller beware– Hospital’s ‘outback’ is desolate and uninhabitable. But she is too adept a writer to leave it at that. Indeed, the story’s narrator, Jess, warns the reader, “only delirium can help [you] now” as you enter this place of hallucination, a mirage where the author takes liberties with the long established traditions of fictional narrative. Jess is fascinated by the art of cartography. She knows composing a narrative and constructing a map are similar. Always ambiguous and untrustworthy, maps and words are both cultural constructs. The astute schoolteacher Miss Rover, declares “‘Words are maps’” (63).\(^{207}\)

\(^{204}\) Hospital explains how the literature of childhood informs “the way you thought, the images you used, the way you spoke…” and discusses the complex intersection between imagination and memory in a reading of this example from _Oyster_: “Sometimes it is a woman, her camel, sore-footed and refractory …” – the T.S.Eliot quotation learned at school confused in her memory with Robyn Davidson’s camel trek across Central Australia (Jorgensen, 2010, 189).

\(^{205}\) The Murri people are the Indigenous Australians that traditionally occupied most of what is now known as Queensland. During ‘settlement’, many Murri were forcibly removed from their lands and placed on missions.

\(^{206}\) As Michel de Certeau’s (1984) work shows, through our actions, we alter, reappropriate and determine everyday things, including places, and stories.

\(^{207}\) See Greiner (2007) for a fuller discussion of the analogy of maps and words in _Oyster_.

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Maps are linguistic constructions, a “lie of the land” for they neither represent the geographical make-up of the land nor the many versions of ways of seeing the landscape (Carter 1996). In *Isobars* Hospital writes, “All lines on a map, we must acknowledge, are imaginary; they are ideas of order imposed on the sloshing flood of time and space” (1990, 1). Throughout *Oyster*, Hospital draws attention to the hegemonic order and the ways in which words constitute a fundamental weapon of the colonial project (Gibson 2002, Arthur 2003). Through the voice of Jess, she draws attention to the linguistic implications of the term, ‘breakaway country.’

They are deviant. ‘Breakaways’, we surveyors labelled them, shadowing them in on government charts. The breakaways, you could be forgiven for assuming, were headstrong: they were land with a rebellious and adolescent streak. (136)

But the breakaways are impassive. “They brood in silence”. It is humans who create and wield words. Greiner claims “Storytellers are threats to people who fear the complexity of language because meaningful tales do not observe the kinds of boundaries found on standard maps” (2007, 1). Despite alternative readings, he asserts, “Hospital’s complex novel is not primarily about gender wars or uncertain nationality but about the nature of narrative itself” (2007, 1). Nothing in the composition of the novel is straightforward, and while the multiple narrators record or tell their stories faithfully, the many viewpoints and contradictions highlight the insurmountable paradox of the unreliability of words and stories.

Throughout *Oyster*, Jess, also known as Old Silence, almost only addresses the reader—her misgivings about the written record and what will be remembered of her account of events are transparent. Silvia Albertazzi asserts that mute or silent women can indeed be signifiers of female strength in resisting the dominant narrative (1989, 31). 208 Despite her disinclination to speak, Jess is resolute in telling her version; and her story is the history we might well remember.

Not surprisingly, given how far back in the colonizing project the disruption of the place goes, Jess finds it difficult to know how to begin her story. “Those two trollops, those two teases, those tarts, Start and Stop. … one person’s termination point being another’s brave new world” (39). In *Oyster* many sides of the story are told, need to be told, before the lines of causality are made known. Even then, the novel refuses to put an end to the questions it insists on asking. There is no

208 “Her victory is the victory of mute women who will never find a voice, but who will tell their stories anyway with their silent screams” (Albertazzi 1989, 30)
comfortable resolution; the story is ongoing, unfinished. The patriarchal Mr Prophet preaches that “The peace which passeth understanding may settle like a dove in every heart” (65) and put an end to questioning. But the young student Mercy sees an image of the “dove of Miss Rover’s word” and in her closed fist “it fluttered violently and bucked about liked a trapped thing”, disrupting the promised peace and opening up more questions. In Hospital’s imaginative world-frame one thing is clear—submitting to the word of others, however powerful, however tempting, will not bring peace. The author provides no easy answers to the dislocations and conflicting evidence embodied in the characters. Reading Oyster is a task of deciphering the multiple strands of the narrative and the contesting voices of the characters, and an acceptance that nothing will ever be settled. Callahan claims that

the multiple valences of identity, thus, are not so much the subject of Hospital’s fiction as the result of its principal and most dynamic theme: how to read reality, followed closely by how to record one’s reading? In the service of these issues, Hospital’s work contains numerous figures whose principal activity is that of interpretation. (2009, 10)

Oyster is no exception; the roles of both Jess and the girl Mercy, the murdered Miss Rover, even the Murri woman, Ethel, are of remembering, recording and recounting. Just as Outer Maroo is located off the map, difficult to find, even to know if it exists, so too the narrative is a borderland that references, signifies and ultimately interrogates the authenticity of the story. The novel insists on the improbability of us ever knowing one ‘truth’. Like a signpost on the highway, a pointer on the map, the epigraph before the Prologue of the novel signals to the reader that those who venture into this place seeking order, looking for a singular, definitive truth, are bound to be disappointed.

The track we leave
Declares no entry or passage
Disappears despite our desire
To stake a claim

Kevin Roberts (1992), Red Centre Journal

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209 For more on Hospital’s discursive techniques see Davies (2000, 194).
210 Fiona Coyle (2001, 128) argues that Oyster interrogates Aboriginal colonial boundaries in such a way as to expose the sense of fear in Australia that with the expansion of Territorial land claims, the future representations of place will have to change, that “this place is consequently rendered unstable, unpredictable, as the clear outlines of the nation-place become hazy.”
Language and the articulation of place and memory are at the core of *Oyster*. Without a record of what was before, who are we to believe, how are we to remember? Tension is generated in the compositional strategies, including the fragmented structure in which multiple voices of the past are layered into the voices of the present. In Hospital’s world-frame, characters exist only through frontiers, crossing the multiple borders between themselves and those who surround them, borders they traverse daily, hourly, in action and memory (Callahan 2009, 79). In this way, the author signals that like the lives of the characters, there is constant movement, a capriciousness, even a shiftiness of stories that eludes containment and demands the reader question their trustworthiness. And furthermore, perhaps, that the representation of many voices might bring about a reassessment of the notion of ‘history’, and show that there are multiple versions of diverse, even conflicting ways of embodiment and equally multiple versions of representing them.

In Hospital’s project, the uncertainty generated in the narrating voices of Jess and Mercy, and even at times the other characters such as Major Miner, or Sarah, gestures to the central paradox of representation, that remembering requires forgetting, and that there is something untruthful about any story. One voice, one story, Hospital implies, cannot adequately represent a sense of place with all its manifestations. Callahan suggests that for Hospital, landscape is an active place, an “exemplum of the moral universe of the characters in the way it embodies unruly connectedness” (2009, 135). The memories, the silences and absences, the traces lingering in the landscapes that are yet to be uncovered, are the rich pickings of the novelist.

Susan Lovell (1996, 204) has pointed out that Hospital’s stories are “clearly linguistic constructions with which she reveals the uncertainties of the junction between memory, myth and what can be deemed the acknowledged history and official record.” Mercy declares, “Any stray comment can turn out to be a hand grenade. In a second the air can be sucked from the room” (34).

There is a clear dichotomy between how the female characters are represented by the powerful male characters, and how they see and represent themselves. The female characters in *Oyster* exist within the conflicting demands of cultural and gendered dislocation that forces them to consider their accountability and responsibility. Even ‘Mother Earth’ feels the brunt of the misogyny. In the novel, Hospital is unequivocal about the synergy between attitudes to women, the way the land is managed for economic return, and what this means for the Indigenous people of the area. In no uncertain terms, a red-neck farmer tells Miss Rover,
‘As for forage-dusting and shooting ’roos and mining on the so-called sacred sites, she’s a real bugger, the land. If you don’t slap her round a bit, the land gives too much damn cheek. … She’s a tough old bitch, is the land. We respect her, and that’s why we give her no quarter. … You don’t understand our way of loving.’

‘No,’ Miss Rover agrees. ‘Sounds more like rape to me.’ (346)

Miss Rover though, is not easily silenced, at least not while she is still alive. Her personal agency and the effect this produces within the town is particularly reflected in the life of her young student Mercy, who has come to realize that by constructing her own narrative, she has the agency to construct her own life. The task of passing on the story is bestowed on Mercy, who is young at the time that the events take place, and open to ideas. “‘Remember me,’” Miss Rover beseeches the girl who is the keeper of her books and journals.211 “Since her departure, Miss Rover has taken up permanent residence as a sniper in Mercy’s head.”(116).212 Recounting her version of events as an older woman, Mercy represents the legacy of Miss Rover’s fortitude in her own agency and determination to be heard.

Hospital describes Australia as “a patriarchal and macho society” and suggests that “women have been silenced in that culture” (in Greiner 2010, 340). But while the female characters in Oyster are exploited, marginalized from the centre of power, even silenced, they show a stubborn refusal to surrender, and an ability to subvert the dominant hegemony.213 There is strength in these women. In their connection to the place there is a knowing; they understand what is going down and what they must do. Even when the place they inhabit is ablaze, the earth literally falling away around them, they are agents of compassion and transformation.214

Personal survival, and the survival of human life in general, even the planet’s survival are referenced in much of Hospital’s writing and that giving voice to their own stories is fundamental to their personal agency. Davies suggests that Hospital invites the reader to “move freely in dangerous

211 This is Miss Rover’s dying wish – that her books and journals will be saved and passed on.
212 Davies describes how powerfully Hospital is able to make words visible, “in reading this text I, and others, find ourselves living and breathing the oppressive force of discourse and the explosive desire for freedom which other discourses make possible” (2000, 195).
213 McKay’s (2010, 6) ideas on the author’s preoccupation with the human spirit in the face of cataclysmic events is pertinent to this analysis of Oyster.
214 Hospital says that her writing reflects her belief that “Everywhere there are people of magnificent moral courage who are able to defy the mores, the culture, the beliefs of the culture or subculture where they find themselves” (Wilson 2008, 32).
places they have not been before, to live out the enormous differences experienced by her characters … the eclipsing of [that] power is possible” (2000, 195).

We are poised at the edge, Hospital seems to say; we need to act now to oppose the violence against humanity, against the earth and, just as importantly, against the forces that work to ‘whitewash’, to discount and neutralize the multiple voices. And if men, from an early age, occupy noisiness, what language is available for women other than “micemutter”, even for the teacher who supposedly commands wisdom and language? Nonetheless, when the men try to shut Miss Rover up, she says defiantly, “Words are like bushfires. You can’t stop them. And you can’t tell where they’ll end up” (64).

Allowing others to assume responsibility for our own actions is dangerous, a situation clearly drawn in the novel. We are charged with the responsibility of resisting the dominant discourses, of bearing witness, of finding our own voice. This brings with it a multiplicity of competing discourses that Davies argues, “affords human subjects the possibility of undermining the (previously unquestioned or unquestionable) power of those discourses that have had a monopoly on consciousness” (2000, 179). There is no ‘one’ story (or history). There is no ‘one’ place. Enmeshed within the geographic folds and shifting features of the terrain (an ‘outback’ commonly represented as without history, empty and lifeless) are the many voices and the multi-stranded stories that are yet to be spoken, yet to be heard. How can the gatekeepers be tempered and the borders negotiated? How can the marginalized find their place, define their belonging? This is the rich territory of Hospital’s work.

In *Oyster*, her apocalypse is set in the uncharted landscapes of Australia’s vast outback where collective madness is fuelled by the miasma of rotting carcasses, scorched earth and relentless drought. Callahan (2009, 208) suggests that “the desire for a purifying apocalypse is an attempt to deny history” and that it is Hospital’s intention that we understand that “time does not run in a straight line, and never has” (2009, 42). The motif of time is, like place and memory, impossible to pin down, impossible to trust. Mercy knows all about the “hocus pocus of precision instruments and

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215 “The acts of men, even when they are boys, Miss Davenport thought, are shouts that rip open the signs that try to contain them. We have no access to a language of such noisiness. Our voices are micemutter, silly whispers” (“The Last of the Hapsburgs” in *Isobars*, 27).

216 Including, I suggest, those that do not pertain to human experience and human interests, but rather, following Arne Naess’s (1973) ideas of ‘deep ecology’, an acknowledgement of the inherent value of all living things. Furthermore, and especially important in the Australian context, and referenced in *Oyster*, Indigenous Australian
of time” (43). The prophet Oyster has predicted the end-of-the-world, but it seems he has got the date and scope wrong, Outer Maroo’s apocalypse, according to Mercy, a rather “tin-pot” affair.

The town of Outer Maroo is represented schematically, an isolated and dysfunctional community that is able to flourish in the form of unchecked violence and paranoia under the control of the self imposed guardians of moral law.217 Indeed, “Anyone who finds the place is lost” (8). Overtaken by catastrophic climatic conditions that Hospital cheekily calls “The Old Fuckatoo”, Outer Maroo is both singular and generic; not a real place and yet it represents all the dark aspects of the “outback” in the contemporary Australian psyche. This is the “lie of the land”, the “default country”, a European view of the topography that insists there are no tracks, a place completely off the map, the environment anomalous and resistant to human existence.

Turning again to Casey (2013, 26-27), I argue that while Hospital’s characters negotiate the borders and margins of the landscape and identity, the author traverses imaginal and memorial margins that serve to resist determinacy, and open the way for that which Casey sees as positive properties in representation, subtlety, fluidity, even vagueness. In this way the novel is itself a map, the landscape of the text formed through memory, imagination and cultural identity, a construction by the author that bears little resemblance to the land itself. Callahan points out that Hospital’s choice of names reminds the reader that fiction is “not a mirror that reflects reality or life, but a created artifact” (2009,1). The reader has a duty to be alert to writers’ attempts to manipulate. In Oyster, Hospital is not pretending to be an “objective chronicler”, but a writer with her own agenda and with a clear purpose that we consider her version.218

The power of Hospital’s writing comes from the way she invites openness to the notion of landscape that is never settled, that her writing comes from an “in(terre)conscious zone that lies between earth and consciousness” (Davies 2000, 185). In the imaginary territory of Oyster the characters are emplaced in a fraught interrelationship between body and environment where they are interdependent, inseparable and in a constant state of mutability. Basic bodily requirements, such as clean air and fresh water are never assured. This is an apocalyptic environment, where the sensory details of the place are imbued with an uncanny that underscores the imperative to flee.

ontological and epistemological systems go back thousands of years and reflect a profound form of deep ecology.217 There are clear echoes of Thea Astley’s fictional town Allbut in the novel, An Item From the Late News (1983) and with Tourmaline in Randolph Stow’s (1963) novel of the same name.218 Dennis Danvers (1991) argues that Hospital’s most convincing work is when she is not privileging the ideas behind the story.
Embodiment in the landscape is central in the narrative, but it is never a comfortable embodiment, and it is through this that Hospital reveals the way that displacement may disrupt sensate memory and its representation. Where they are, where they have left, where they long for, represent intense sites of meaning, not simply a backdrop to the characters lives, a location to be passed through. Making meaning of their existence comes down to where they find themselves. But where are they? Off the map, communication with the ‘other’ world controlled by the patriarchy, engulfed in fire and retribution. Paradoxically, maps impose order and control in Hospital’s imaginative world-frame. The characters’ entrapment represents another puzzle and another gesture to the uncertainty of the memories, the records and the account that is being presented to the reader.

But while Oyster presents an apocalyptic, grotesque view of collective madness— an Australia in the grip of stifling political control and climate change, we recognize the situational details and remember such places. In her acknowledgments, Hospital thanks the people of outback Queensland whom she encountered in pubs, on cattle and sheep stations, down opal mines, in miner’s shacks, and on the road. Real people. Real places. Hospital’s proficiency in evoking a sense of place in her writing is mirrored in Casey’s assertion that the tendency of place “to hold its contents steadily within its own embrace” maintains memory, and in addition, “place, being internally diversified and externally distinct from other places, while also open to them, attaches and embraces memory” (1987, 186).

In Oyster, busying herself with details in the kitchen, Mercy remembers her mother’s words that it is the details that may ‘save you on drowning day’ … the fragrance of the loose tea-leaves, the dimples in the battered pot, the high polish, the curved surface, the reflections, her moon face elongated, the texture of the tea-cosy, hand-crocheted, the whistle and steam of the kettle, the roiling boiling water like a river in flood. (129)

Synaesthetistic evocation continually reminds readers of the status of place implicit in human existence, both the place inhabited by the characters in the novel, but also of our own places, imbued with our own memories, or indeed our own fears of an apocalyptic future.

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219 Callahan suggests that in the novel “the dry outback landscape reprises here its function in Australian culture as a place where individuals are stretched and tested, where the physical challenges appear to raise the issue of one’s spiritual health, and by extension, where questions are asked of Australian society as a whole” (2009, 206).
Reminiscent of an archaeological dig, the novel unpicks the layers of human involvement in the earth of Outer Maroo to reveal this inextricable relationship between people and place. As I have suggested earlier, literature that is concerned with place and displacement provides an opportunity to examine Indigenous and non-Indigenous attitudes to place, where social space is contested between the imperatives of mining and profit, and other interests that do not have a commercial orientation. In *Oyster*, Hospital’s representation of the contested nature of land is palpable, coinciding with what Fiona Coyle suggests is the way that “the map depicts the intersection of colonial and Aboriginal cultural boundaries” (2001, 114).

The sense of place represented in the novel is fraught with deceits, cover-ups and guilt—this place is wounded, and the damage is indisputably the result of the misreading of the land by the non-Indigenous inhabitants. Once again, Indigenous knowledge and land management has been marginalized and silenced. Germaine to the preoccupation of cartography in *Oyster*, is Derek Gregory’s (1994) work on the effect of maps and spatial images, and how the processes of cartography and the images of space can be seen as the literal and figurative physical representations of the geographical imagination. With all of its affiliated effects on the way geographical and cultural knowledge is viewed and valued, the “spatialized other to the hegemonic order, the creation of a centre and margin [has] enabled the world to be perceived as a differentiated, integrated, hierarchically ordered whole” (1994, 3).

This is difficult, even painful ground to tread. Like all non-Indigenous Australians, I am a beneficiary of the legacy of the colonizers. While there has been a proliferation of life-writing by Aboriginal writers in recent decades, for too long their writing has been constrained and marginalized to fit the National myth-making and dominant Australian literary character. While in the novel Hospital takes care not to speak for the Murris, she bears witness to their central presence in the country. As Miss Rover tells her young student Mercy, “the Murris know how the miners and cattle cockies think, don’t they? But not vice versa” (353).

While the complex experience of the Murris is not, of course, represented in the novel, and most of the Murris dwell outside of Outer Maroo and the narrative, there is a significant presence of sustained history, song-making, knowledge of place and the hope for a continuing endurance importantly referenced. Storytelling and embodied practices that respond to the multiplicity of voices

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20 Paul Carter’s work has been an influence on Hospital’s thinking about cartography (Callahan 2009, 218).
provide a threshold to reconfigure and renew identities, both personal and collective while prompting the need to question the power of dominant discursive practices and their effect. Greiner claims that Hospital “delights in taking freedoms with the long-established conventions of traditional fiction” (2007, 381). As in much of her writing, in Oyster memory and the representation of memory are constantly called into question. We are never entirely sure whose story it is, whose version we should believe. And how can it be otherwise when places, and the memory traces that adhere to them, are uncertain and unstable? Hospital resists our yearning for the author to remove all doubt, to allow us to submit and to follow. Placed on ever shifting ground, her stories are in constant flux, the site of change. And they cannot be relied upon.

Oyster climaxes in that millennium milestone, the year 2000. The opening sentence positions the reader in familiar territory in Australian writing: “If rain had come, things might have turned out differently, that is what I think now; but there were children in Outer Maroo who had never seen rain” (3). This is a place where the ordered systems of governance “leave no trace on the land” (4). In this alienating landscape the locals squint in the intense heat and the escalating horrors go unremarked because death is common in the ‘outback’.

In the novel, Jess struggles with the illusionary nature of tables and taxonomies and charts that signify nothing more than the desire to impose order on the ungovernable. While the scientists measure and predict climate change, she laments the

surveying instruments and charts, flags, nations evolving and devolving, ancient hatreds, ancient fears … ceaselessly renewed, apocalyptic fantasies, millennial dreads, city by-laws, earthquakes, inundations … here we are parsing and labelling and taking topographic readings and turning on the radio and looking at our clocks and making love. (140)

Like the population of Outer Maroo, we, the readers, sit back, observing, even predicting, the inevitable disintegration of the environment in the face of growing exploitation and rapid depletion of natural resources, while doing nothing to try to prevent it. But it has not always been so. The novel reminds in glimpses of what once was “the memories of little things” before the “hot empty

221 The Murris in the novel would perhaps have a different point of view of the trace on the land, being able to ‘read’ the country through its inherent features. While not about Murri country, see T.G.H. Strelhow’s Songs of Central Australia (1971) about the Aranda (Arrernte) of the Central Desert.
sky and imagined clouds” of the Old Fuckatoo (130). The ancient Aboriginal form of memorialisation, the ability of songs to hold memory, and therefore the learned knowledge and skills that sustained life in this environment over thousands of years is gone. The people of Outer Maroo are disconnected and lost. Even the Murri people, whom Hospital positions as an alternative model for environmental and spiritual sustainability, act and react to the whitefella agenda, waiting, it seems, for the dystopia to collapse.222

The landscape is on fire, a burning hell on earth. The practice of patch burning as part of traditional Aboriginal land management to shape, cleanse and renew the land and its species is in stark contrast to Hospital’s representation of fire in the Christian sense as a destructive, vengeful and reckoning force signifying death and the end of a place as a habitable environment. The enduring geographic and cultural knowledge of the Murris that has maintained their survival in this country, and Ethel’s optimism that she will be staying, her declaration that “This is my tree, Jess … I was born under this tree” (397), that her mob will return and somehow reclaim all that is lost, seems misplaced given that the entire landscape is in ruins.223

Home, it seems, can always and yet never be reached, because, as Callahan appositely says, “for people who have undergone disruptive change, [home] is located above all in memory, given the absence of continuity in space with time of the past” (2010, 120). Choosing how to relate to the past is something we see all of the characters constantly attempting, confronting us with the fact that memory does not simply assail us unbidden but that we also interact with it, manipulate it, summon it up, reject it.

As I have suggested earlier in relation to Gibson’s (2002) work, writing plays a seminal role in the colonizing process.224 Finding a place on the public record is how history is made. Enabled by imagination, the novel reveals the way knowledge, even in the face of violent disruption, is pieced together. And while the narrative does not represent the whole, it may come some way to redress the

222 Coyle (2001, 112) suggests that Oyster confronts the reader with a threat to boundaries, and that the Aboriginal sacred space is literally “undermined” by Western society in the form of opal diggers.
223 For a full account of Arrernte ideas of geographical history, see Carter (1996, 78) and T.G.H Strelhow who wrote that “Questioned about their belief that the landscape is a living trace of totemic ancestors, Aranda elders are quite able to appreciate the difference between then and now, to acknowledge that the landscape now is but a dim reflection of what it must once have been. … Theirs is a wholly spatio-historical awareness– one reason why they can have but little use for our concept of history as chronology, our impatient urge to put things behind us” (Songs of Central Australia, 329, note 156).
224 In an interview with Greiner (2010) Hospital recalls how she was “appalled” and “incensed” by the conditions of Aboriginal people living on reserves in 1963, and how for Oyster she talked with Aboriginal leaders.
silences and absences of the dominant discourses that at least to some extent, rely on the homogeneity of the author’s subjectivity.

In *Oyster*, there are many instances of a character registering that moment when the present is defamiliarized because something about the past is seen that was not previously noticed, constructing memory through remembering, and re-remembering, in their attempts to form the remnants into coherent narratives. Displaced, struggling to survive in circumstances that are both familiar yet distressingly unknowable, Jess, Ethel and Mercy each probe and evaluate their many confused and conflicting rememberings against their understanding that the story they are constructing can never be truly representative. Her death imminent, Miss Rover knows she does not have much time for remembering, but she has left clues that, she hopes, will lead her student to discover something of a ‘truth’ in what she has recorded.\(^{225}\)

In the deepest sense, this place represented in the novel is ‘unsettled’. There is little evidence of the civilization promised in settler myths and colonizing discourses. In Outer Maroo there have been battles between the forces of good and evil before—“Think 1788,” one of the characters remarks. But “Armageddons come and go, and are just as quickly forgotten” (42). Memory is selective. Both individuals and cultural communities learn to be careful in what they remember. Unable to face their memories the characters exist in a seemingly hallucinatory world. Nevertheless, the interaction between place and story in the novel, despite being a fiction, can be interpreted as gesturing toward real environments that continue to be fiercely contested within the contemporary political and economic spheres.

Not only does Hospital’s writing frequently depict the memories of individuals in an uncertain tension with their reconstruction (Callahan 1996, 73), but through the multiple voices in the novel, she exposes the competing histories that vex the nation as it strives for a coherent narrative. Mercy is determined to remember the skills taught by Miss Rover, to make connections between cause and effect, the past and the present, but this positions her in opposition to the historical imperatives of the town, for one of the town’s contradictions is that memory operates in reverse here, as the requirement to forget. Knowing herself as the storyteller, Jess struggles to come to terms with the devastating collapse of her world. She sees what will be forgotten, and what she needs to maintain

\(^{225}\) On the question of ‘truth’ Hospital says, “I am absolutely not saying there’s no such thing as truth. But … that our memories, our points of view, our religious slants, our politics, can hugely colour our perceptions of that truth” (Wilson, 2008, 32).
through the written record and narrative. In this disfigured place she thinks, “I write because what else is there to do? I write against time. I write against the whim of the fire. If the flames pass over us, I would like a record, at least, to survive” (41).

“But,” she acknowledges, the “telling is complicated” (6). Characters in the novel remember occasions differently. This is particularly poignant for Ethel, the Murri woman who has been witness to earlier assaults on the place and her people. In the burnt out ruins of Outer Maroo it is easy to forget that this environment once sustained human life for so long. “I despair, therefore I insist on hope. … Hope, and the belief in the possibility of redemption, is at the heart of all my work,” Hospital says (2008, 34), and reminds us that there is another way. In the novel the Murri Elders say, “you cannot mutilate your mother without repercussions” (351). But “memory is so cunningly selective” (171) and we have learned to be “careful not to remember” (172). Mercy thinks of the story in the school reader: the little boy who kept his fist in the dyke. ‘If anyone slacks in the hard communal duty of forgetting, she thinks, who knows what sort of inundation will drown the town?’ (22)

Resonant with Oyster is Massey’s insistence that “the mutability of landscapes, the tectonic wanderings [that are] accepted now in science and geography” (2006, 35). The novel presents the possibility for a “re-imagining of landscape and place … rocks on the move leading to an understanding of both place and landscape as events … that will again be dispersed” and in this way “both space and landscape could be imagined as provisionally intertwined simultaneities of ongoing, unfinished stories” (2006, 35).

Questioning subjectivity in story making has been a persistent quality in Hospital’s work. Language and narrative are intrinsic to the formation of identity but in her writing both resist standardized forms. Inconsistency, uncertainty and paradox, with all the gaps and silences that this implies, gesture to her understanding of the multiple nature of identity. Identity, and the stories that represent it, is never fixed, is in constant fluctuation, a personal matter regardless of the commonly accepted descriptors and in this regard, Oyster represents the author’s claim that it is “in the margins and in longings … where all homelands begin” (2003, 257). Through its refusal to fix on anything, the novel explicitly articulates the way that what is remembered and what will be forgotten is in the hands, or indeed the words, of the storytellers. Oyster reveals that despite attempts to silence and marginalize individuals and communities, stories, with their multiple voices and multiple readings, will find a way into the nation’s collective identity.
With this in mind, I want Miss Rover to have the last word.

‘The existence of a town,’ she says, ‘can be camouflaged by a map, but there are things you can’t keep a lid on forever. Sooner or later, they are going to leach their way out through this frangible soil and leave their mark.’ (59)
Conclusion: Beginnings and Re-beginnings

… getting back into place, the homecoming that matters most, is an ongoing task that calls for continuing journeying between and among places. Just as there is no limit to the ways in which we may get back into places, there is no effective end to how we may continue our ingression into their indefinite future. (Casey 1993, 314)
When I was growing up on a farm in the mid-west of Western Australia there was not a lot to do. Some days I would flatten the fragrant grass and, spreadeagled in the warm sun, watch the ambulation of the clouds.

I know the clouds have scientific names but I don’t bother to learn them. I am interested in their constant movement and their shape-shifting abilities— the way they emerge effortlessly out of the blue sky to form a never-ending parade of animals, sometimes dragons, even the faces of people I know. Appearing, disappearing, reappearing. And time, like the whimsical clouds, drifts by. It is a kind of beginning— my first understanding of a sense of place, of the interplay between time, memory and imaginings, and that whatever it is I am seeing and experiencing is drawn from unbounded possibility. Although far from fully realized, this is my early introduction to the notion that things are not always as they seem, and that materiality is not easily confined to linear representations— my childhood musings, it seems, converging with Casey’s view that “there is no limit to the ways in which we may get back into places, there is no effective end to how we may continue our ingress into their indefinite future (1993, 314).

Mr Shore the math teacher’s explanation of a line intrigues me— this mark on the page is a representation, a small fragment of a something that stretches to infinity, with no beginning and no end. And for every one of these lines there are, I am told, countless more. I try to imagine the “swarm of possibilities” that have to be left out when this line is taken (Carter 2009, 1). Where do they go, these events, these stories? While there is a basic human need to hear and tell stories, I have argued in this dissertation that stories are made of remembering and forgetting— always contested and never certain. In this way our “world is composed of the traces of movement, but our representations conceal this” (Carter 2009, 5).

As Casey’s work makes clear, the sense of place is complex— the interconnection between landscape, memory and identity is always one of emplacement formed through an interpretive lens. In this way, any reading of place, whether embodied or through the facility of literature, is informed through the lens of subjectivity. Writing about place brings landscape into perspective, but it is a subjective translation, and it is with this in mind that I have considered the novels in the case studies. This dissertation is premised on Casey’s ideas of the particularities of place (and how this resonates with the sense of ‘home’ and ‘belonging’, or indeed ‘dislocation’ and ‘alienation’) as well as his understanding of the relationship between place and memory. There is an obfuscating quality of memory that is suggestive of its unreliability— memory is not factual, and indeed, attempts at
linearity are likely to marginalize and silence differences. However, as Ricoeur maintains, memory is intrinsic to story making and “on the deepest level, the level of symbolic mediations of action, it is through the narrative function that memory is incorporated in the making of identity” (in Hannoum, 1981,103).

My interest in the constitution of a community through its shared stories, and the sense of connection and belonging that may come from stories that are emplaced in particular landscapes and that hold particular memory, informs my own practice as a creative writer as well as offering a template for readings that are able to respond to the open-ended and mutable nature of place and memory. While the authors discussed in this dissertation denote the specificity of place in their writing, the flexible facility of language enables them to embrace many voices, voices that may have been silenced by events and time.

Moreover, in recognizing the permeability of borders, their narratives move across thresholds towards new possibilities, and in this way make space for the many stories that will follow. This process of reconstitution, of telling and retelling, “where the boundary is no longer an ending” (Casey 2007, 508) is intrinsic to story making. Myerhoff describes the way that stories go round in circles:

they don’t go in straight lines, so it helps if you listen in circles. Because there are stories inside stories, stories between stories, and finding your way through them is as easy and as hard as finding your way home. And part of the finding is getting lost. And when you get lost, you really start to look around, and listen. (2007,17)

If Casey (2007a, 508) is correct, then it is the stories of events that are played out most intensely on the boundaries rather than at the centre that require our attention. Hauntings and traces permeate the raw material of the novels I have examined, which is to be expected in view of the contested nature of representation in writing that is emplaced on colonized and wounded land. Nevertheless, writers belong to a dynamic tradition and enact a cultural contract that I argue is able to assist communities in dealing with change, and may even facilitate change. In the construction of the novels, the authors sourced material for their fictional accounts from personal experience and from the reports of the experience of others in their task of translation and transformation. In this process of literary production they reconfigure the stories that inform our collective identity. While

Scott claims that he is a novelist, not a spokesperson but nevertheless says that he would like to think “there is a place for literature, for story, in social transformation” (2015, 207).
“[m]emory can recreate the gone world” (Gibson 2013, 250), it is through stories that memories are transmitted and indeed, secured for future reference.

My purpose in this dissertation has been to discuss the interrelationship between place and memory and the way that narrative and story making are deeply implicated and deployed by writers in matters of representation. There is no finish line here, just more questions that invite further supposition and research. Like landscape, language is fluid and unstable, its borders are changeable, shifting towards new ideas. As history has shown this is highly contested territory in the way that Greiner contends: “storytellers are threats to people who fear the complexity of language because meaningful tales do not observe the kinds of boundaries found on standard maps” (2007, 386). Within creative production, the unfixity and uncertainty of place and memory presents challenges for the writer but it also affords possibilities for a new cultural dynamic and original ways of seeing. In this I refer to both components of the dissertation, for each comprises their own forms of knowledge constituted within the research and production.

Hospital says, “I despair, therefore I insist on hope. … Hope, and the belief in the possibility of redemption, is at the heart of all my work” (in Wilson 2008, 34). My task as a storyteller is just beginning, but how is my connection to landscape to be rendered on the page? Although my emplacement is wholly individuated and particular, it shifts like sand– this relationship between place and me appears too multi-faceted and nuanced to be represented in the straight lines of writing. But furthering Cameron’s (1996, 91) claim that good stories may assist in reawakening the yearning to take care of places, my hope is that the powerful sense of place evoked in novels such as those examined here may facilitate a deeper understanding of the complex nature, as well as the inherent value, of the land and sea that is known as Australia.
Works Cited


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