Landscape, history and Indigeneity in the Australian narrative: magic nihilism in the works of Richard Flanagan and Alexis Wright

A thesis and novel submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Faculty of Arts, Department of English, Macquarie University

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October 30, 2016

The work presented in this thesis is to the best of my knowledge and belief, original except as acknowledged in the text. The material has not been admitted either in part or in whole for a degree at this or any other university.

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November 10, 2016

Acknowledgements

I wish to acknowledge the assistance I received in undertaking this task from Associate Professor Jane Messer and Dr Toby Davidson.

My heartfelt thanks goes to my wife Danja Derkenne who had the patience not only to thoughtfully critique and proof my ideas but to assume more than her fair share of the burdens of a partnership by allowing me to lock myself in a study for three years.

I also thank my son Jordan, who before his death from cancer in 2010 grasped the nettle. His point of view of making the best with what you've got convinced me to return to university and study a subject just for the enjoyment of it.

Contents

Abstract

Richard Flanagan and Alexis Wright are two contemporary Australian authors considered by some, including the authors themselves, to be inspired by Latin American magic realism.

However, using a chronological approach that examines misapprehension of the landscape and its signification since colonial times, and the extension of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy into a theory of landscape, this thesis demonstrates the ontological equivocation evident in many of Flanagan's and Wright's works is part of a much older and particularly Australian tradition that evokes competing ontologies imbued with nihilist elements often ameliorated with humour. The alternate ontologies presented by Wright, Flanagan, and some Australian authors of the colonial, postcolonial and modern eras are induced by and primarily contained within the apprehension and perception of the Australian landscape. The perceptual contradictions are brought about by three elements: the failure of Australian landscape to affirm the tenets of Romanticism; the haunting of the landscape either through the absence or dislocation of an Indigenous presence or through the erasure of cultural and historical perturbation; and the inability to remythologise the demythologised landscape in any form that binds the description of self affirmatively with being.

The creative writing component, *Bowraville: Twelve Stories* is a selection of interconnected stories centred on the town of Bowraville in Northern New South Wales. The stories individually and collectively engage with the literary tropes of magic nihilism discussed in the critical component by examining the way landscape, history and perceptions of Indigeneity affect ways of being for the protagonists. As such, the stories are ontologically confounding, nihilist and sometimes humorous.

Introduction

Australian texts dealing with Australian landscape, that is, texts set in Australia authored by writers with some personal experience of the Australian landscape, are not only differentiated by their setting, but often by the way being in that landscape reflects consciousness (Braun-Bau, Huggan, Moore).

Richard Flanagan (John McLaren) and Alexis Wright (Devlin-Glass "Carpentaria") produce texts which extensively deal with landscape and the perception of landscape. They are among the most recent manifestations of a textural preoccupation that goes back to the first days of Australian colonisation (John McLaren, Mead "Nation, Literature, Location"). Both authors use landscape as a characterful force –that is, as a protagonist in their novels (Vernay, Stadler, Flanagan and Wilson). Both authors stress the landscape's personal, ecological and spiritual importance in their articles and interviews (Wright "Deep Weather, Flanagan "Out of Control"). Like many before them both Flanagan and Wright describe characters ontologically confounded by the landscape (Moore "Greek Gloom", Phillips).

In many respects, including place, ancestry, style and approach Flanagan and Wright are writers with different concerns. Flanagan says he writes from the perspective of the socio-economically disadvantaged (Flanagan and Hugo). Wright sees her writing as multifaceted, identifying herself in various texts as representing particular Waanyi and more generalised Indigenous concerns (Wright and Moss, Wright "Where to point the spears?"). Flanagan's novels are for the most part centred on Tasmania, Wright on Northern Australia. Flanagan often uses historical account as a basis for his writing (Deyo). Wright uses contemporary postcolonial issues of identity (Martin *et al*). Yet their writing deals with the same issues of landscape, Indigeneity, history and being. Though

both authors have described themselves as having been influenced by Latin American magic realist authors (Flanagan "Borges", Wright "Interview with Kerry O'Brien") and while both have been described as authors of magic realist fiction (Devlin-Glass "Carpentaria", Delrez) they can be seen as part of a continuum in Australian literature which deals with the confounded nature of being in the Australian landscape, and the potentiality for that situation to lead to melancholy and despair (Stadler "Green Eyes", N. Smith). This thesis argues the confounded nature of being in the Australian landscape also leads to magic nihilism.

This thesis argues Australian literature which deals with landscape is characterised by elements of existential nihilism such as effacement of the self and the perception of extant meaninglessness and that these characteristics persist to the present day, as evidenced in Wright and Flanagan's works (Heseltine). The description of the psychosis of perception that is generated from not being either of the landscape or possessed of the landscape, but wishing to be so, is often mistaken as magic realism, that is, of writing styles reminiscent of García Márquez (*One Hundred Years of Solitude*) on the one hand or Carpentier on the other (Hart, Carpentier *Kingdom of this World,* "On the Marvelous Real"). The ontological frictions the description of Australian landscape generate are classically colonial and postcolonial, but are exacerbated by a landscape antithetical to Romantic concerns and haunted by the palimpsests of a geography that has been reinscribed in an effort to erase its autochthonous interstices. The characteristics of nihilism and ontological friction bound with landscape are described in this thesis as magic nihilism, a term whose definition is explored in Chapter One. Through the examination of Flanagan and Wright's texts, it is argued that in their failure to reconcile landscapes with self and belonging they are imbued with elements of melancholy, despair and hopelessness. The bleak magic nihilism of such interrogative

texts is ameliorated by the use of humour.

Throughout, the words "indigenous" and "aboriginal" when capitalised refer to Australia's original inhabitants. The use of the terms "Aboriginal" and "Indigenous" are only made because of the inadequacy of language to refer to the indigenous peoples and language groups of the Australian mainland, Torres Straight and Tasmania. Some texts use terms such as "colonisers" or "settlers" for the non-Indigenous but such terms do not take into account, for example, the convict experience (and moreover implicitly suggest a peaceful colonisation). Henry Reynolds proposes for the term "murri", currently denoting and Indigenous person of Queensland or North West New South Wales, to have wider application and denote an Indigenous person generally and "migloo" for a non-Indigenous person (*Why weren't we told?* vii). Reynolds' proposal has, if such terms were more widely known, some credit. The term "White" is also used to denote people of Anglo-Saxon and Anglo-Celtic cultural heritage.

Landscape specifically refers to non-urban places both cultivated and uncultivated. Country when capitalised is used in the Indigenous sense of being place which is intimately and spiritually interconnected with one's being (Gammage "Country", Rose *Nourishing Terrains*). Bush is used in the Australian vernacular sense to mean non-cultivated, non-urban Australian landscapes (Watson). Other terms, such a Nietzschean existential nihilism are defined as required. The definition and validity of the term magic realism is examined in detail in Chapter One.

In Chapter One it is argued that what passes as magic realism in Flanagan and Wright's texts has more to do with Franz Roh's original thesis on post-expressionism than the Latin American writing with which such texts are often associated, and that therefore Flanagan and Wright do not write magic realism. The chapter further proposes that magic realism is such a contended term it has little or no real meaning

(Baker "Magic Realism"). Flanagan and Wright work in a style that is more closely aligned with Roh's arguments than Latin American writers. Flanagan and Wright express, like Roh, concerns that have their origins in Romanticism. While the link between Roh's oscillating ontology and Romanticism is further explored in Chapters Three and Four, Chapter One also sets the framework for regarding non-Indigenous ideas concerning Indigenous spirituality in post-Jungian terms of Romantic longing.

Chapter Two explores the assertion that the way being is defined by landscape, that is the sense of how the self is envisaged, is mediated by the perception of the environment. Drawing on Merleau-Pontian philosophy, an historical incident when French fishermen believed they were being attacked by giants on the Western Australian Coast is used to demonstrate how ruptures in the process of affirming the self through landscape can lead to perceptual psychosis (Péron, Konishi). Chapter Two argues that we carry landscapes within us, and if those internalised, appercepted landscapes, that is landscapes of the mind's eye, conflict with what we perceive, the result can lead to an ontological oscillation where we are in continual flux believing we see one thing, and then another (Rose *Nourishing Terrains*). It is further contended that the way landscape is informative of the psyche has deep resonances with Indigenous concepts of Country (Chatwin, Stanner *After the dreaming,* Christie "Ex-centric knowledges", Rose *Nourishing Terrains).* Such concepts have implications for eco-critical theory which is more fully explored in Chapters Three and Four (Abram, Tacey, Cronon "Trouble with wilderness"). Chapter Two also explores the existential nihilism that may result from "dis-ease" with the landscape, and proposes that textural examination of some of these characteristics indicates a style of writing referred to as magic nihilism (Huggan viii, 29).

Chapters Three through Nine demonstrate Flanagan and Wright's magic

nihilism is part of a continuum in Australian literature. Chapter Three sets the template for colonial magic nihilism. It is argued in this chapter that Australian landscape was implicitly compared to British landscapes of the period, and that the comparison established binaries relating to how the landscape was perceived and how colonial writers expected it should be perceived. The ontological friction thwarted and subverted Romantic and Picturesque expectations of landscape leads to a situation where landscape's Romantic potential was never quite fulfilled and sometimes actively subverted (McCann, Cousins, Kane). Further, landscape became to be regarded in the colonial period in terms of absence and negativity, particularly with regard to the Indigenous presence, a presence which it was widely acknowledged in literature of the time was met with antipathy and violence. These factors created a landscape that was contested, haunted, and adversarial, as particularly evidenced in the works of Marcus Clarke, Henry Lawson and Barbara Baynton. Australian landscape by the end of the colonial period often became to be regarded in terms of nihilism and melancholy. Chapter Three posits not only the existence of an ontologically oscillating binary in colonial texts, but also a fascination with melancholy (Baker "Binarisms", Spindler, Gelder "Australian Gothic", Enderwitz). The limited success of the Australian Romantic, especially in poetry, and the strange tensions created by such short stories as Rosa Praed's "The Bunyip" are explored as exemplars of the ontological crisis such processes generate (Gelder and Jacobs *Uncanny Australia*). The chapter argues that the appropriative processes in Australian literature, and their failure to achieve the aims of the appropriation lead to a postmodernist Romanticism, meaning a Romanticism that subverts itself (McCann "Textual Phantasmagoria").

In Chapter Four, Flanagan's and Wright's responses to these colonial concerns are examined, particularly in relation to Flanagan's *Wanting, Gould's Book of Fish* and *The*

Sound Of One Hand Clapping, and Wright's *Plains of Promise*, *Carpentaria,* and *The Swan Book*. The chapter argues that while both Flanagan and Wright address colonial issues, particularly those to do with Indigenous dispossession they do so in quite different ways. The chapter contends that what passes as magic realism in relation to Wright's works is actually an Indigenous response to dispossession and rupture from Country.

Chapter Five sets out the Australian postcolonial template for magic nihilism by examining some of the equivocations White authors of the period had in relation to landscape, and how that translated into conflicted views concerning the entwining of landscape, nationalism and mysticism. Even though the landscape is desired to be imbued with human traits such as animation, hetero-gendering, redemption, articulateness, and self-affirming potential through agencies such as inscription, all these desires are confounded (Abram "Language and Land" 124, Mary Allen, McGaw and Pieris "7: Skins: (s)scrypts", Muecke *Textual Spaces*). The landscape becomes still, quiet, damned, haunted and uninscribed (Stanner *After the Dreaming,* McLaren "A Haunted Land"). The difficulty of maintaining the idea of self in such a landscape is proposed as an explanation as to the allure of the littoral, a boundary between the unknown and known (Taylor "Littoral erosion"). The chapter further contends that the bleak nihilism often found in Australian literature of the period was to some extent ameliorated by a laconic humour (Heseltine). The chapter proposes that Richard Flanagan and Alexis Wright are essentially nihilist writers, and as such are part of a literary tradition that goes back to the beginnings of the Australian novel. It is further proposed that such magic nihilism, insofar as it reflects social psyche, has troubling implications for Australian national identity, as the attempt to resolve unresolvable ontologies leads to nihilism whose social expression is a narcissistic psychic stress capable, in Flanagan's words, of leading to a societal "disease" of "blandness" and "conformity" ("The Australian

Disease" 5). The chapter proposes humour can be used as an antidote to such nihilism and that Flanagan and Wright are part of a continuum that uses comic encyclopaedism and dry understatement throughout their works (Marmysz, Indyk "Provincialism").

Chapter Six examines Flanagan and Wright's response to these postcolonial concerns, particularly in relation to Flanagan's *Death of a River Guide*, *Wanting*, *The Sound of One Hand Clapping* and Wright's *Carpentaria* and *The Swan Book*. The chapter examines how Flanagan and Wright treat issues such as nationalism, haunting, the perception of landscape and history as well as how both authors use humour to ameliorate their nihilist sentiments. Though Flanagan and Wright approach these issues from different perspectives, it is asserted they explore and subvert the very same themes that were evident in earlier writers such as Herbert and White.

Chapter Seven argues that magic nihilism persists into the modern era, particularly in the work of Indigenous authors. Authors of this period interrogate the disjuncture between history and memory, ecological and economic concerns and landscape and Indigeneity. The chapter argues that modern era Indigenous writing has for the most part re-animated the landscape. Australian landscape is seen as being both alive and personally affirmative by authors such as Melissa Lucashenko or Tara Winch. The writings of such authors highlight the interconnectedness between being and landscape, and implicitly argue for its absence in non-indigenous writings. David Malouf's "The Rock and Mrs Porter" is discussed as an example of the *frisson* between Indigenous and non-Indigenous expectations of landscape. The chapter also examines how Aboriginal reality can be confused with magic realism, and how ecological concerns have been a focus for many authors of this period.

Chapter Eight examines Flanagan and Wright's response to the modern era template, particularly in terms of Aboriginal reality, ecological concerns and Indigenous

memory (Leanne, Ravenscroft "Carpentaria"). The way history and literature intertwine is examined on the premise that history is constantly reworked, but literary works seldom are, imbuing them with a truthfulness that authoritative history finds difficult to possess (Gao). The chapter posits that such a process imbues a literature with a characteristic that its undermining of the chimera of heterogeneity leads to a portrayal of things and beings in magic nihilist terms. The equivocal relationship to fact engenders a self-reflexivity that leads to "longevity and a certain legitimacy" (McNeer "What Might Be True" 70). In both Flanagan and Wright's works, the conceptual self is often negated. The presence of being is described as one of negativity.

The concluding chapter argues that in proffering a continuation of magic nihilist concerns, both Flanagan and Wright are essentially political writers whose contention is that the issues which have characterised some Australian literature throughout still persist, and have done so since colonial times. The chapter further examines works by Flanagan and Wright which do not neatly fit the arguments of this thesis and lack the magical elements found in their other works, concluding that even so these works are characterised by extant nihilism. The works examined are Flanagan's *The Narrow Road To The Deep North* and *The Unknown Terrorist* and Wright's *Grog War*. It is asserted these reflect the nihilist and comic concerns that form some of the characteristics of Australian magic nihilism.

The creative component of this thesis consists of a twelve-story cycle that concerns issues of identity, place and ontology set in the small New South Wales rural town of Bowraville. The oscillating ontology presented includes the blurring between psychosis and actuality. The landscape is described as beautiful and animate but degraded: all vegetation species mentioned are NSW Government declared noxious weeds, and it is implied that the land is suffused with organochlorine and

organophosphate poisons. The main characters are either immigrants, or Australian born with varying degrees of awareness of their identity. Many characters feel they don't belong. Many also express a wish to leave. As the protagonists struggle with issues of identity and expression (clichéd proverbs are universally both misquoted and misapplied), the bleakness and magic nihilism of such misapprehended existence is revealed. The stories weave a fictional tragedy with historical events, particularly the "Freedom Bus Ride" of 1965 in which Charles Perkins and a group of Sydney University students toured several towns in Northern NSW to highlight White community attitudes towards race. *Bowraville*, though a collection of nihilistic stories with a bleak metanarrative, is not without its humour. Locations, beliefs and events in the stories are researched from personal experience (the author lived near Bowraville for eight years in the 1980s), Ann Curthoys' 2002 *Freedom Ride, A Freedom Rider Remembers*, newspaper feature articles and interviews undertaken by the author in the early 1980s for various news publications, as well as Margaret Somerville and Tony Perkins' 2010 *Singing the Coast – Place and Identity in Australia.*

1: 'Magic realism' and Australian narrative

> Maybe it was a debil-devil - some angry spirit bird; or kerdaitja, maybe kerdaitja; or a giant insect, tjinguru pintapinta purlka. It came up over the sand-dune, without legs - the sounds of the hot time thunderstorm, swooping. The men chucked spears and boomerangs. They couldn't hurt it; there was nowhere to hide …
>
> Later, we discovered *aeroplane* and *sheet of iron*, and it took us inside and then we knew why the spears hadn't worked. (Johnny Warangula, quoted by Billy Marshall-Stoneking preface n.pag.)

Introduction

It would be hard to argue that the two contemporary, prize-winning Australian authors Richard Flanagan and Alexis Wright have much in common in their writing styles but they do share a significant Australian characteristic this thesis describes as magic nihilism. Magic because the narrators invite us to believe in alternate realities where ghosts, shape shifting and time shifting are possible or at least possible in the protagonists' experience of being, and nihilism because concepts of self and self-with-purpose, that is, life with meaning, are continually negated. "See me! See me!" Will Phantom shouts to a stranger who never arrives (Wright *Carpentaria* 499). Whether it is Sir John Franklin confronting a "sense of his own horror" while hallucinating and dying, Oblivia, mute and with no agency, possessed only of memories Bella Donna "has chosen to tell her", ending her days in a ghost swamp or Aljaz Cosini finding himself in a "gorge of death" because he has

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1993 photograph of Yanyuwa men dancing the "Aeroplane Dance" depicting the crash of an American bomber near Borroloola during the Second World War. Mythopoesis is often derived from the actual, not the imaginary world. Photo courtesy of Ludo Kuipers.

ignored the "language" of the landscape, both authors write of an erosion of being and purpose, often using landscape and the history inscribed on that landscape to describe existential crisis (Flanagan *Wanting* 177, Wright *Swan Book* 89, Flanagan *Death of a River Guide* 296-297).

Ontological oscillation – the continual shifting back and forwards of two or more equally valid ontologies suggesting either a strange land or strange being - is not a new phenomenon in Australian literature[1]. Barbara is convinced her family are turning into cattle in Thomas Keneally's *A Dutiful Daughter*. Norm Shillingsworth finds himself surrounded by ghosts in Xavier Herbert's *Capricornia*. Unseen horror either resides in the bush or a character's psyche in Barbara Baynton's *Bush Studies*. Three schoolgirls and a teacher mysteriously disappear literally into the landscape in Joan Lindsay's *Picnic at Hanging Rock*. In many other texts ghosts and landscape seem to conspire to unsettle the protagonist: the reader is never sure if what is being narrated is a supernatural event, the description of individual hallucinatory psychosis, or even an intended metonym for such psychosis. Graham Huggan asserts Australian literature is "recurrently afflicted ….by some deep-seated sense of ontological dis-ease" (viii). Huggan sees the viewpoint proposing a collective psychosis as reductive in that it is more likely to be the concern of the critic than the author, but nonetheless there is no denying "ontological dis-ease" is described in many texts, to the extent as Laurie Duggan asserts in *Ghost Nation* such hauntings mean the veracity of real and imagined spaces becomes blurred (viii). Alexis Wright in "On Writing Carpentaria" quotes Stephen Muecke's suggestion that

[1] By Australian literature it is meant in this thesis the literature set in the Australian environment by authors who have resided in Australia or the Australian colonies. Nicholas Birns and Rebecca McNeer note that it includes expatriates. Alex Miller (as quoted by Anita Heiss) notes "We don't need an explanation of it; we need to celebrate it" (n.pag.). Anita Heiss believes Australian Literature includes D.H. Lawrence's *Kangaroo,* as Lawrence resided briefly in NSW as well as Western Australia ("Australian Literature"). Philip Mead writes that it is fundamentally a literature of place, or topography, indeed landscape, and is therefore one which, among other things, informs nationhood ("Nation, Literature, Location"). Richard Flanagan and Alexis Wright produce works which are in many respects about place, as are many of the works discussed herein.

Indigenous philosophy layers ancient forms and "imaginative inventions" (*Ancient and Modern* 12). Muecke writes "it oscillates between the ancient and the modern" (12). The subversion of certitude in such writing is often nihilist, comic and incredible. "… Indigenous storytellers could …be likened to García Márquez's grandmother telling incredible stories with a deadpan look…", notes Wright, continuing, "Such stories could be called supernatural and fantastic, but I do not think of them in this way" (10). In his re-imaginations of historical incident Richard Flanagan also deadpans incredible stories, fascinated like Borges with how "reality is endlessly fictional, and fictions are endlessly realistic" ("Lightness of Borges" *Mr Gable* 44). Supernatural, fantastic, incredible: such writing might run the risk of being opportunistic Australian-flavoured magic realism: a strategy Maria Takolander notes indigenous fiction authors are sometimes suspected of adopting merely in order to sell well (*Catching butterflies* 171*)*.

However, magic realism as an interrogative term does little to explain Flanagan and Wright's works, not least because of the contended history of the term itself. Magic realism, even its constituent words, have little relation with what Franz Roh in his seminal 1925 essay on a new form of painting proposed. Magic realism has not only shifted its main focus from one artistic endeavour to another, but has often become synonymous with what Roh dismissively would have labelled surrealism (Takolander *Catching Butterflies* 128).

Moreover, while magic realism usually posits competing, epistemologically coherent ontologies[2], usually as binaries[3], it for the most part favours one system over

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[2] By epistemology it is meant a system of knowledge, such as "Alexis Wright is an author" (objective) and "Alexis Wright is a wonderful writer" (subjective). Epistemologies inform ontologies (meaning having to do with existence) such as "I hold the novel *Carpentaria* in my hand (subjective) and "I know of the Carpentaria region, but have never visited" (objective). In this sense, ontology is the personal expression of epistemology.

[3] For example, Amaryll Chanady proposes empirical rationality as opposed to supernatural belief (*Magical Realism* 22).

another. William Spindler posits Patrick Suskind's *Perfume* as an exemplar of first world metaphysical magic realism, wherein the binary occurs between Jean-Baptiste Grenouille's supernatural olfactory abilities and the world in which he lives. The binary is resolved, in that the novel's premise is Jean-Baptiste has powers that transcend physical laws, and that his belief in such powers is not the result of a delusional psychosis. Spindler writes that such a work comes closest to Franz Roh's original term, because, it "present[s] phenomena of the preternatural kind" inducing a sense of "unreality" (80). That may be true, but if so, one can only assume that texts that do not resolve the binary would come closer still. Roh was not in favour of any resolution to the binary: what entranced him, in terms of painting, was the oscillation between seeing something known, and seeing it anew. Spindler posits two other binaries, being "ontological", where the binary is between the natural and supernatural, an exemplar being Kafka's *Metamorphosis,* and "anthropological", where the binary is between European and indigenous epistemologies, an exemplar being *One Hundred Years*. In all three cases Spindler argues the tension of the binary is resolved, and the reader "is simply invited to accept the ontological reality" presented (83). The reader is asked to accept the premise that the reality of the novel resides in the veracity of the magical realism presented. However, in many of Alexis Wright's and Richard Flanagan's works, even though they may superficially conform to Spindler's typology, the ontological tension is never resolved. As readers, we are never sure that what the protagonist describes is of the real world or one imagined by a protagonist, and a result of the hallucinatory experience of psychosis.

Roh's essay: *Magischer Realismus*

Franz Roh is the art critic and photographer[4] who is generally thought to have made popular the term magic realism - a translation of his *Magischer Realismus* - which he first used in *Nach-expressionismus: magischer Realismus: Probleme der neuesten Europäischen Malerei* (*Post Expressionism*, *Magic Realism: Problems of the latest European painting* - referred to henceforth by Wendy Faris' English translation of 1995). Roh's 1925 essay celebrated a return to more figurative work after the chaos of expressionism, a movement which in its depiction of Weimar angst aggressively distorted object planes and perspective for emotional impact. Though there is a clear inheritance of terminology, as argued by Irene Guenther, what Roh meant by magic realism is very different to what the term has now come to mean, as somehow indicative and descriptive of certain works of authors such as García Márquez and Allende.

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Giorgio de Chirico, Mystery and Melancholy of a Street (1914) Image source: wikiart.org.

Roh preferred "calm and thoughtfulness" over hot passion: he clearly was not enraptured by the frenzied, often angry works of the expressionists (17). Instead, he exalted painters such as Giorgio de Chirico for their "objectivity" (31, 18). The ability to spiritually reconstruct the quotidian suggested to Roh a Husserlian phenomenology –

[4] Through his avant-garde montage photographs Roh sought to demonstrate that photography was a way of seeing, just like painting (Stetler).

the idea that phenomena exist independently of one's experience - such that he would remark later that "the autonomy of the objective world around us was once more to be enjoyed; the wonder of matter that could crystallize into objects was to be seen anew" (*German Painting* 115). The idea has remarkable resonance with Patrick White's assertion ("The Prodigal Son") that:

> I wanted to discover the extraordinary behind the ordinary ... I began to see things for the first time. Even the boredom and frustration presented avenues for endless exploration; even the ugliness, the bags and iron of Australian life, acquired a meaning. (n.pag.)

What Roh wished for, and believed he was seeing, was a form of cognitive disassociation between the painter and what was being painted, magically transformed into something new and fresh: magic because of the oscillation between the freshly perceived thing and the known thing. Transposed from art theory to literature his *die Verfremdung vertrauter Formen*[5] views had Borgesian intensity: authorially, always write as if you don't fully understand what it is you are describing, the result will be magical.

Roh wrote in the spirit of the age:

> ... Post-Expressionism offers us the miracle of existence in its imperturbable duration: the unending miracle of eternally mobile and vibrating molecules. Out of the flux, that constant appearance and disappearance of material, permanent objects somehow appear. (22)

His "vibrating molecules" had resonances with quantum uncertainty and unobservability[6]. Humanity's oscillation between dreams and reality becomes unmeasurable and unknowable, but nonetheless part of an underlying truth. The same

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[5] Literally using familiar forms in an unfamiliar way.

[6] I do not mean to infer that Roh was familiar with quantum physics, only that he was informed through popular Weimar culture as to some of the philosophical questions quantum physics instigated, as would any *Otto Normalverbraucher*. Heisenberg's calculations on the energy levels of "atomic oscillators" (devices for AC current) led to his paper, "On Quantum Mechanical Interpretation of Kinematic and Mechanical Relations." Heisenberg's paper earned him immediate fame and recognition, and his work was widely reported in the popular press.

idea, expressed in very similar language, appears when Dorrigo Evans opens a book in Flanagan's *The Narrow Road To The Deep North*:

> It was as though there were two worlds. This world, and a hidden world that it took the momentary shafts of late-afternoon light to reveal as the real world - of flying particles wildly spinning, shimmering, randomly bouncing into each other and heading off into entirely new directions. (67)

Roh wanted a painting style that could show the mundane in such a new way that it, through dispassionate contemplation, would reveal "strange shadows or phantoms" or an "inner spiritual texture" (Guenther 35). His "magic" - a term used reluctantly - refers more to the "miracle" of the "world's rational organisation." As Irene Guenther notes, the paintings Roh argued as demonstrative of his theories are dismal: they depict scenes that are over-exposed, clinically dissected, and coldly accentuated. Even de Chirico, who insisted his style was *scuola metafisica* in labelling his paintings chose words with nihilistic force such as "*malinconia*", "*male*" and "*angoscia*" (Bohn 151).

Roh and Romanticism

Roh's New Objectivity had deep resonances with the Romantic aesthetic: the way he wished to view the world was grounded in the premise of the transcendental contemplation of the external world. William Wordsworth in his preface to the *Lyrical Ballads* argued for "emotion recollected in tranquillity" in much the same way as Roh argued for cool reason as a way of accessing the truth of objects ("Preface" xxi).

What Roh argued for – the experience of looking at the known object and the same object as if it is unknown – is an unresolvable ontology that also pervades many Australian texts. When the schoolgirls disappear into the rocks in Joan Lindsay's *Picnic at Hanging Rock*, the landscape, Hanging Rock is at once known and unknown. Mr Hussey is full of "comforting facts and figures" while the girls disappear through some unknown agency of the rock (13). What Roh was attempting to celebrate was not a

return to the hyper-reality of classicism, but figurative work with embedded surreal elements that, importantly, did not subsume the work (Evans). Roh's magic realism heightened reality by questioning its authenticity, by "turning daily life into eerie form" (Evans n.pag.). In Australian texts such as Flanagan's *Gould's Book of Fish* the oscillating ontologies subvert intentionality because it is never clearly articulated which of the competing realities presented is to be preferred. The effect in such works is compounded, as Andrew McCann points out, by a phantasmagorical "slippage" between exteriority and interiority; what the reader perceives to be the world created by the author, and how that is perceived as by the reader, situated in that world through the act of reading, as narrative or vision. ("Textual Phantasmagoria" 138). The opposition between the productions of "spectacle" and "imagination" create a need to order the perceptions of the "bodily eye" with the "intellectual eye" (138). McCann argues the resulting ontological phantasmagoria - not only the "shifting medley or real and imagined figures, as in a dream" but "optical illusions" such as those associated with the *Lanterna Magica*[7] are very much a Romantic concern (138). As a mode of writing, magic realism shares these Romantic concerns, but ones which are difficult for Romanticism to contain, creating as magic realism does, a vacillation of an aesthetic caught between two poles of theories based quintessentially on the Platonic notion of the reality of the idea on the one hand; and on the other the Aristotelian view of art as *mimesis,* by which it is meant the expression of self through mimicry.

Ghosting of the landscape

If what Roh described is not magic realism, as it has come to be, but a cold re-rendering of reality in such a way that its renewed representation elicits fear and wonder

[7] A sixteenth century forerunner of the mid twentieth century slide projector, but one which allowed the projection of mechanical sides, and therefore the illusion of movement.

- a union of the mundane with the mythic through the beautification of the bleak - then, ironically, many Australian texts owe more to that philosophy than to the Buenos Aries writers Roh inspired when his essay was translated into Spanish in 1927. Where many Australian literary texts get their persistent ontological equivocation or oscillation from is in fact not the anthropological tensions Spindler argues occur almost spontaneously in literatures of the "periphery" but through a completely different set of binaries that generate such horrors as historical amnesia, as opposed to historicity, disregard of landscape, as opposed to the Indigenous concept of Country or a nihilist effacement of self, as opposed to self-affirmation. These binaries invite hauntings. Xavier Herbert's *Capricornia* is not considered a magic realist work, but it informs Alexis Wright's *Carpentaria,* which often *is* seen as magic realism, in many ways, including a sprawling narrative full of absurdist twists and ironies, and indeed ghosts. Wright's Norm(al) Phantom has more than nomenclatural inheritance from Herbert's Norman "No-Name" Shillingsworth who encounters ancestral ghosts in *Capricornia*:

> Squatting - no, crouching - at the bottom of a grey and green-walled well of light, he sensed the Spirit of the Land to the full. Phantoms came crowding, wailing afar off, whispering as they neared, treading with tiny sounds, flitting like shadows. He felt afraid. His scalp crept. (293)

Ghosts as beings in the landscape and literally of the landscape itself, rather than displaced spirits, who through injustice have not moved to a spiritual plane, feature prominently in both Flanagan and Wright's works. "The ghost-white under-leaf of the wax-green foliage of the stick trees became a procession of spirits moving across the soft earth of darkness…" (*Carpentaria* 182). The Palawa cannot tell if George Augustus Robinson is man or ghost in Flanagan's *Wanting* (59). The Palawa call out to unanswering ancestors "so that their own souls would not be lost forever" (214). The hauntings have many causes: the ghosts brought about by historical amnesia, a landscape of negativity, in which the landscape takes on a function beyond mere place

and nihilism - by which it is meant that the idea of a purposeful and meaningful self is eroded by isolation, hopelessness and futility (Hodge and Mishra 14, Stadler). The narrative of *Wanting* becomes immediate because of its historical acuity coupled with the mythopoetic forces of amnesia, landscape and nihilism. These are not new concerns – they date to the nineteenth century. Another example of how history, amnesia landscape and nihilism form a mythopoetic force in Australian literature is the massacre at Darkie's Point[8], a spur on the Great Dividing Range overlooking the coastal plains and the sea near Ebor, northern New South Wales. Darkie's Point is generally accepted locally, especially by members of the Dhungatti and Gumbagurrir nations, to be the site where some 200 men (and probably women and children) were either forced to hurl themselves over a cliff, or were shot and hurled over, by a small posse of armed vigilante settlers in 1841. The massacre, or another nearby incident at the same time, is described in detail as an eyewitness account in Finney Eldershaw's 1854 *Australia As It Really Is* (62-75). Even so, the massacre is barely mentioned in the historical record. Darkie's Point is not a name that appears on many maps, including Google Maps, even though it is registered with the Geographical Names Board of NSW. The only detailed written, as opposed to oral, reference to the event is Eldershaw's, also quoted in full by Geoffrey Blomfield in his 1986 *Baal Balbora*. The slaughter was one of a series of such incidents which occurred in the gorges of the upper Macleay River (Blomfield, Harrison). According to Gay McAuley debate exists as to the general date, location, numbers involved and even the veracity of such incidents (Robert Manne "In Denial"). Eldershaw, Blomfield and Harrison's[9] examination of the circumstances of Darkie's

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[8] The narrator in Peter Carey's 1988 *Oscar and Lucinda* says local accounts of how the nearby Darkwood got its name (because of dark foliage, not the massacre) taught him to "distrust local history" (1).

[9] Indeed, Australian history texts of the late nineteenth century were not nearly so contended when it came to describing Aboriginal massacres. In describing the confrontation between squatters and Aborigines, Alexander and George Sutherland say of the squatters "their retaliation oftentimes exhibited a ferocity and inhumanity almost

Point indicate the possibility of a wilful amnesia. These attitudes persist[10] even though a poet as lauded as Judith Wright, drawing on her father's stories, described the same massacre in her 1953 work "Nigger's Leap: New England". The amnesia begets the haunting. Judith Wright writes "...two strands - the love of the land we have invaded, and the guilt of the invasion - have become part of me. It is a haunted country" (*Born of the Conquerors* 30). The reduction of the value of human life within a contended and haunted landscape, made so by settlers' intent on gaining possession, leads to what Judith Wright calls a "double aspect" exteriorising an interior inner reality (*Preoccupations* xxi). The landscape is imbued with an interior reality of psychic stress.

An emptied landscape by itself is enough to engender melancholy. Melancholy engenders existential weariness, is that all there is? This is inexorably intertwined with existential nihilism, there is nothing there. Bernard Smith argues in his 1980 Boyer lectures that such melancholia was projected onto the Australian landscape not so much through mother country longing and loneliness but through fear and guilt in relation to the removal of the Indigenous. Because the colonial era landscape was often unable to fulfil the requirements of the Romantic aesthetic, and because its depiction was in the context of an oscillation between historical fact (the horrors of colonising warfare) and fantasy (the calm progress of the pioneering past) it would ultimately engender other forms of melancholy such as *existential* nihilism.

Eldershaw describes himself as the only one of his party sickened by the carnage[11], but he does so in language that has deep resonances with the Gothic.

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incredible in civilised men" and goes on to describe in detail the practice of mass poisoning by arsenic (81).

[10] Ann Curthoys in her recollection of the 1965 Freedom Ride - a bus trip by university students to highlight the racial prejudice of many towns in New South Wales - recalls that a major theme of criticism by the locals in the towns they visited were that they were "stirring up trouble." Bowraville residents, particularly were "outraged that their town had suddenly acquired this notoriety" (171, 195).

[11] Eldershaw writes: "Sick of the horrid carnage below, I fain would have retired from the dreadful spot, but all my

Eldershaw trivialises horror, making it as mundane as Queensland pastoralist Frank Hann's comments, quoted by Alexis Wright, that "Blacks must obey and be taught to obey, otherwise they will, as the saying is, 'ride rough-shod over one'" (Wright "A Family Document" 227). The frank admission of such views is often tempered by an attempt to trivialise the outcome. G.C. Bolton's 1972 entry for Frank Hann in the *National Dictionary of Biography* mentions nothing of the crimes of murder, kidnapping, human trafficking and rape Alexis Wright accuses him of, referring only to "unwelcoming Aborigines" (n.pag.). The trivialisation of events is not unique: the whole meta-narrative of Australian history in the twentieth century can be summarised as an attempt to present the case that nothing much happened.[12] Eldershaw was representative of nineteenth century views in that there are plenty of texts which fully acknowledge the terrible violence perpetrated by both sides of the conflict, but perpetrated in unmeasured retribution by the colonists. These texts melt away in the twentieth century, as if, as Henry Reynolds in a 2014 radio interview put it, the relationship of violence between the effectively warring parties was acknowledged in the nineteenth century, "removed" in the twentieth, and partially restored in the early years of the twenty-first (n.pag.). The removal allowed a national identity which as Reynolds writes allowed a "soothing syrup": the "celebration of what came to be viewed as a uniquely peaceful history of settlement" (Reynolds *Forgotten War* 16). Of course the "Black War" and its "genocidal components" were not avoided by Clive Turnbull, Kylie Tennant and Hector Holthouse among others, but Max Harris opined in 1973 they were "blandly hypocritical" about it all (*The Angry Eye* 64).

The soothing syrup and the violence it belies in itself engenders an ontological

efforts, entreaties, threats, were utterly useless" (73).

[12] For example, Alexander and George Sutherland in their *History of Australia and New Zealand from 1606 to 1890* describe the history of Tasmania from the time of the height of the so-called "Black War" in 1829 to "many years after" as "simply an account of quiet industry and steady progress" (35).

binary. Another force adds to the mythopoetic capabilities of an amnesiac history: René Girard in *Violence and the Sacred* posits the idea that the brutal elimination of a victim, either as a singular or group entity, leads to the situation where that victim appears simultaneously as the cause of the violent crisis and its appeasement (99). Girard says such a state engenders sacredness, and is a foundation of some religions, such as that of fourth century desert nomads (199). Girard barely mentions Christianity, but the Christian references in Wright's *Carpentaria* are clear. Lyn McCredden asks what ghosting or scape-goating, haunts and tears at Australian models of identity-making, in Australian literature. She quotes Kate Grenville's *The Secret River* in which the character William Thornhill at the end of the book comes to love, and be haunted by, the land he has claimed, now devoid of Indigenous occupants, creating, as McCredden writes, an "oscillation between …emptiness and fullness" (23). This is the *sanctus*, sacred and *sacer*, accursed, binary that Girard describes as being at the core of "sacred" violence, and it is the "rivenness" which McCredden further contends underlies a swathe of Australian literature (Girard 265, McCredden 22). Norm Phantom, his body broken and stinging not from crucifixion but from storm considers the word *trespass*. "The word was weightless, but had caused enough jealousies, fights, injuries, killings, the cost could never be weighed" (*Carpentaria* 266). Rivenness might well be the oscillation between emptiness and fullness, but is also an oscillation between ontologies suggesting on the one hand the "screamed falling in flesh from the lipped cliff" and on the other hand redemption: "O all men are one man at last" (Judith Wright's "Nigger's Leap"). In the Australian context many works use unresolved ontological ambiguity to approach an historical experience of such immensity that the only way it can be represented is through its reimagination. Alexis Wright reimagines the repercussions of alcohol licencing laws on a fictional family in *Grog War*, and the impact of the Stolen Generations on fictional characters in *Plains of Promise*. Flanagan reimagines Australian

prisoner of war experiences in Japanese labour camps in *Narrow Road* and the near total destruction of Tasmanian Aborigines in *Wanting*. In *Death of a River Guide* Aunt Ellie walks Aljaz through a landscape "soaked in blood" (203). Without this mythopoesis the factual rendering of history runs the risk of trivialization or even erasure from memory. This is precisely what Alexis Wright decries in a nation that chants "BUT WE KNOW YOUR STORY ALREADY" (*Carpentaria* 1).[13]

The attempt to express the above binaries often leads to texts in which characters seek (sacred) redemption, but also leads to texts where, again, there is no absolute epistemological certitude. It is that uncertainty which drives much of the narrative in *Narrow Road*, in which Dorrigo Evans grasps a nihilistic verity:

> …the truth of a terrifying world in which one could not escape horror, in which violence was eternal, the great and only verity, greater than the civilizations it created, greater than any god man worshipped, for it was the only true god. (307)

Both Flanagan and Wright re-regard history in such ways as to hope to reshape its narrative. What is referred to as magic realism in *Wanting*, for example, can be argued to being a narrative technique to inflate and untame that which has been reduced and domesticated, to render uncanny – "the materialization of the terrifying impossible *jouissance*", that which is thought to be known (Žižek 71). Ben Holgate argues Flanagan "inverts received assumptions about historical reality" (2). By "blurring the boundaries between fiction and history" through a process of cognitive disassociation of prior histories the reader is made aware of the capacity of historical narrative to reduce and domesticate the awe-engendering (4). For example, in Flanagan's *Wanting* the narrator retells and re-imagines the known fragments of Mathinna's life so that such a history is re-regarded. The effect of such a process is unsettling for one who imagines a

[13] The phrase comes from Wright's "Le Pacte du Serpent" (translated into French from her English manuscript but never published in English): *"Mais on la connaît déjà, votre histoire" (1)*.

comfortable familiarity with Mathinna's biography, as it disrupts familiarity. Examples of the reduction of truth to a comfortable familiarity abound in Australian history, and is a process criticised by Flanagan for failing to engage with modern society and ecology ("South of no north"). Flanagan in *Gould's Book of Fish* and *Wanting,* Wright in *Carpentaria* and *Plains of Promise,* and others such as Henry Reynolds in *Why weren't we told?* and Bruce Pascoe in *Convincing Ground,* seek to interrogate historical complacency. The attempt to rupture the presumed historical narrative, (Reynolds calls it "a uniquely peaceful history") of a society becomes remarkably similar in approach to Roh's original thesis: to dispassionately re-examine the quotidian for its underlying fear and wonder (Reynolds *Forgotten War*, Kindle loc. 113). While the above examples are not the "calm" contemplation that Roh extols, they certainly assert that the familiar should be reviewed without the filter of symbolic meaning so it is renewed - inflated and untamed.

The problem with "magic realism"

Flanagan's and Wright's texts differ from García Márquez's *One Hundred Years*, in that there is an *unresolved* equivocation concerning the different ontologies presented, while in *One Hundred Years* no such equivocation exists. Flanagan's and Wright's ontological equivocation is part of a long tradition. Norm Shillingsworth's ghosts in *Capricornia* are personal, contentious, and their existence invites nihilism. To the reader they may or may not exist: they could be a product of Norm's perceptual psychosis. Remedios' ascension when she is waving goodbye in *One Hundred Years* is public. The reader is invited to believe in the veracity of the account. Nor do the above-mentioned Australian texts describe anew and *maravilloso,* wondrously, fantastical historical events in the way Alejo Carpentier does when describing the Saint-Domingue slave revolution that led to the founding of Haiti. Even though both Flanagan and Wright speak admiringly of Latin American writers, their form of ontological equivocation is quite

different from the writers to whom they refer. The magical shimmering between known and unknown ontologies in these Australian texts is often predicated only on despair.

An oscillation of perception is evident in many of Flanagan and Wright's texts, and demands the reader question the psychological "reality" described. Thus Flanagan's *Death Of A River Guide* is inherently of a different mode of writing to Sam Watson's *The Kadaitcha Sung*, in which Tommy Gubba's magical powers are not interrogated by the reader, but are portrayed as part of an epic continuum. Nor is *River Guide* of the same mode of writing as in John Scott's *Warra Warra*, in which the town's publicly visible, colonising ghosts are a direct metonym for the historical interaction between the Indigenous and non-Indigenous (Mesher).

The unreality of history

Human experience is perpetually fogged by the imprecision of our senses and memories. To describe realistically, what it is to be human necessarily draws on description of the inexplicable. Johnny Warangula's description of an aeroplane, quoted at the beginning of the chapter, *reads* like magic realism, even though it is not, because he didn't initially understand what it was he was describing. It is a technique of writing that was used to great effect by Jorge Luis Borges, who even though he denied being a fabulist narrated events, according to Carter Wheelock "as if he didn't fully understand them" (117). Borges is described by Flanagan as being more concerned with how "reality is endlessly fictional, and fictions are endlessly realistic" (Flanagan *Mr Gable* 43). This is a similar proposition to Alejo Carpentier's 1949 declaration of "*lo real maravilloso*" and his novels such as *The Kingdom of this World* (*El reino de este mundo*) which describes (historical) events so absurd they may as well have been fiction.

Henry Reynolds argues Australian histories have been written to soothe non-Indigenous angst. To express a repressed history may well require a reinvention of that

history (*Why weren't we told?)*. The effacement of a reality (what Reynolds calls the ongoing and heavily unbalanced guerrilla war between the Indigenous and non-Indigenous) leads to a "not" reality of peaceful Australian settlement which oscillates with the reality that Australian settlement was violent. Danilo Kiš argued that to make historical data of effaced history truly authentic, it has to be endowed through an imaginative process, with new form. This is precisely what Alexis Wright does in *Grog War*, *Plains of Promise* and to an extent, *Carpentaria*, and what Richard Flanagan does in *Wanting, One Hand Clapping* and *Narrow Road*.

By extension the momentous and often trivialised reality of modern post-colonisation Australian history creates the tendency to depict a benign transplanting of European culture, and not the events depicted in "Black Armband" history. To create historical authenticity, authors ironically using invention and imagination as well as the interrogation of amnesia. (Curthoys "Exodus" n.pag.). As Roh himself puts it, is the "magic" of such writing generated because of a "mystery" "descended" upon the represented world, what Roh came to call surrealism[14], or is it because of a mystery that "hides and palpitates behind it" (Guenther 16)? With both Flanagan and Wright's texts the incessant oscillation between the known and unknown particularly manifests itself at moments of nihilist potency, such as Mathinna drowning in a puddle (*Wanting* 247).

To the extent that Wright and Flanagan write histories, their histories are ones which Inga Clendinnen claims has the effect of "inspiriting" the narrative at the expense of "significant narrowing of vision and manipulations of the truth" (*The History Question*

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[14]See Roh: "While Magic Realism turned life into eerie form, Surrealism, which developed only a few years later, set out to smash our existing world completely, inspired by the extremism of Dadaism which had intervened. Surrealism shared with Magic Realism the urge to leave nothing veiled, to grasp all things as sharply as possible. But it went further to construct a new world a world none of us had ever seen before, possibly not even in our fantastic dreams. The ordinary things of life were bewitched; constellations, ideas of space and the function of gravity were transformed" (*German Painting* 138).

46). Flanagan uses the technique in *Gould's Book of Fish*, mixing fantastic fact with believable fiction (in a way that brings into question the cultural assumptions used by the reader to sort fact and fiction. For example, the historical "extract" from the Archives Office of Tasmania in the afterword of Gould's Book of Fish is a fiction, and the line between history and fiction is blurred by Flanagan's depiction of the historical persona of Jørgen Jørgensen, whose historical autobiographical "shred," published in 1835 in itself makes extraordinary reading.

Latin American and local influences

The magic nihilism in Australian writing is understandably often thought fungible with magic realism, even by the authors who practice it. In an interview with Kerry O'Brien, Wright has expressed admiration for Gabriel García Márquez, Eduardo Galeano, the French-Caribbean writer Patrick Chamoiseau and the Mexican writer Carlos Fuentes, whose views on the inseparability of the past and present Wright believes has resonances for modern Australian Indigenous writers (n.pag.). Wright's dream of a common spirituality of reconciliation, also expressed in interview, has resonances with Fuentes' belief that all Mexicans need to recognise that Indians are intrinsically part of their culture, their identity and heritage, and must therefore work to ensure justice for that population (Fuentes 33).

However, Wright's nod to Latin American writers does not detract from the importance she places on Indigenous story telling tropes which could be confused with magic realism, nor indeed in her belief in the "deadpan look". Traditional Indigenous story telling often involves a complex interweaving of song-cycle, religious and totemic elements illustrated by shape-shifting protagonists who are one and the same with the landscape. As Penny Van Toorn points out, such stories might appear to modern Western readers as the intersection of "two discursive orders" but from a different

cultural viewpoint can be seen as an entirely "self-consistent" story form (*Indigenous Texts* 39). Alexis Wright's employment of time shifting, her use of tenses in *Carpentaria,* and shape shifting, when clouds, sea and earth become serpents, in her narratives is the employment of traditional Indigenous story telling techniques as much as it is of other tropes. Ronald and Catherine Berndt describe these techniques as including often humorous orality, shape shifting, time shifting and the portrayal of natural features as characterful forces (387-408). Time shifting circular story telling, when a narrative ends where it begins, has non-Indigenous admirers. Tim Winton uses the technique in *Cloudstreet*, and Richard Flanagan tells Giles Hugo he takes pride in the "circular structure" of *Narrow Road* (n.pag.). Cultural *morés* can also confuse Indigenous story-telling tropes with magic realism. Suzanne Baker makes the point that European readers, imbued as they are with Christian culture, can hardly accuse Indigenous writers of indulging in fantasy or magic when such descriptions are as "real" to them as Christian mythology, with its magical elements of, for example, a virgin birth ("Magic Realism"). Alison Ravenscroft points to Alexis Wright's parody of White "nonsense", such as alien abductions, in Carpentaria: it is no more magical than the Pricklebush Mob seeing huge creation spirits move through Desperance ("Carpentaria and its critics" 204). As for the "deadpan look", laconic, understated humour, as discussed in chapter six, pervades Australian literature. Its subversive potential lies not only in interrogating a reality, but in rationally responding to overwhelming nihilism.

Flanagan also acknowledges a Latin American debt, but his surreality can also be seen as the remythologising of historical trauma. Flanagan seems fascinated by the interplay between fact and fiction, especially in *Gould's Book of Fish* and *Wanting*. *Gould's Book of Fish*, *Wanting*, *One Hand Clapping* and *Narrow Road* all rely in part on historical record to inform their narrative. Flanagan even includes historical sources and notes in

a "Postscript" at the end of the 2012 Random House Vintage edition of *Wanting,* as opposed to his "Author's Note" in the 2009 edition which states "This novel is not a history, nor should it be read as one" (255). "I am drawn to questions which history cannot answer," Flanagan writes in his "Postscript" (255). The retelling of history and the re-imagining of historical lacunae is a technique also used by many Indigenous writers. Penny Van Toorn explains such retelling contests, "the myths of heroic exploration and peaceful settlement that, for many years, were disseminated through the school system" ("Indigenous texts" 39). In *Gould's Book of Fish* Mr Hammet relates how Professor De Silva hates those who look for facts in stories: "history for him was no more than the pretext for rueful fatalism…" (20). Alexis Wright, in fictionalizing the institutional horror of mission life in *Plains of Promise* and interrogating non-Indigenous notions of Indigeneity in *Carpentaria* appears to agree with Hammet, suggesting non-Indigenous history effaces the Indigenous self. The telling of stories is a means of maintaining self-worth. Flanagan, discussing *Narrow Road*, says to Indiria Lakshmanan that:

> I think people come back from great traumas with a certain sort of cosmic wound to the soul. And that wound passes out into their families and communities and sometimes whole societies ... And after great trauma, people have to forget for a time. But then, equally, freedom exists in the space of memory and at a certain point, you have to get back into those shadows. (n.pag.)

Describing "those shadows" both Flanagan and Wright often describe obliteration and death. "How could flesh and blood disappear into thin air?" Fishman asks the saboteurs in *Capricornia* to which he is answered "…the ground swallowed them and they went rolling down to hell" (420). There is no realism in this magic, just nihilism. Death, the final nihilistic outcome, is often curiously treated. Mathinna, drowning in a puddle, realizes "all things end in dirt and mud" (*Wanting* 247). Her bare feet become the earth. On the last page of *The Swan Book* Oblivia's screams become the

"sigh of a moth extending out over the landscape" (334). If there is any metaphysical redemption in these outcomes, it is precisely because the protagonist has ceased to exist as an individual, becoming instead of the landscape itself. Aljaz on the last page of *River Guide* rises as a sea eagle in a "circle growing ever outwards" (326)[15]. Again, the conceit, becoming of the landscape at death, has literary precedence. Harry Joy at the end of Peter Carey's *Bliss,* dying for the third time, spreads himself "thinner and thinner" until he is just a "sigh" absorbed by the leaves of surrounding trees (282). Jackie, in Patrick White's *Voss,* melts "at last into the accommodating earth" (427).

Psychic stress and spiritual Indigeneity

Roh's spirit-affirming oscillation also implies psychological stress in that a world seen anew is a world defamiliarised. This is a proposition not very far removed from Sigmund Freud's "The Uncanny". Freud writes that the "uncanny effect is often and easily produced when the distinction between imagination and reality is effaced" (367). The relationship between the Uncanny and Roh's magic realism has special significance in Australia because, as Ken Gelder and Jane Jacobs note, the uncanny in the Australian context often presupposed an affinity with a European imagining of Aboriginal spiritualism (*Uncanny Australia* 62-64). By reviewing the world through imagined spiritual indigeneity what ends up being viewed is an ontological oscillation. Gelder and Jacobs argue that in such a context "Aboriginal religion" becomes a means by which modernity can become reconcilable with itself (1). The Aboriginal "sacred" retains its residual non-"real" features, but "is also activated as something emergent, as integral to what we might (or should) 'become'" (1). Similarly, David Tacey uses a "new consciousness" concerning Aboriginal reconciliation to argue for a "new enchantment"

[15] It should be noted that becoming one with the landscape, or a feature of the landscape is nihilistic in the Western imagination, but not the Indigenous. For example, A.W. Reed's *Aboriginal Legends* details not only ancestral spirits becoming landscape features, but becoming the cosmos ("Star People").

that allows the non-Indigenous to overcome the alienation inherent in the Antipodean landscape (*Re-enchantment* 45*)*. Lynlea Rodger calls such a process the "eclectic recombination of others' traditions" as a means of spiritual succour (Rodger "Which spirit?" 27). The psychic stress of Romantically wishing metaphysical transcendence with Nature but doing so in a landscape where the Indigenous are marginalised and the landscape itself is often seen as adversarial and terrifying - leads to the nihilist contemplation of the *horror vacui,* the horror of discovering nothing, which in Heidegger's explanation of the Nietzschean term is generative in itself of nihilism ("Third essay" *Genealogy of Morals* 31).

What many Australian texts lead to in describing landscape is an existential nihilism. The Australian experience is often bounded by Romantic conceits. As Andrew McCann puts it in "The literature of extinction", "pathos laden" "counterfeit Romanticism" and historical circumstance that limit the possibility of the successful description of landscape in anything but ultimately nihilist terms (51-52). Alexis Wright imagines a future coastal settlement in *The Swan Book* not far removed from the bleak third world conditions visible in such regions as Utopia north-east of Alice Springs. The landscape, polluted, rubbished and degraded, generates the female characterisation of nihilism, Oblivia. Richard Flanagan, in describing Mathinna's travails in Romantically metaphysical terms, comes to a Gothic and elegiac mythopoesis within *Wanting*. Nihilism is especially evident in the Tasmanian experience, because so little survived intact of Tasmanian Indigenous culture that it has melancholic reverberations.

Conclusion: a crisis of identity

Marilyn Lake writes of Tasmanian Aboriginal elder Jim Everett's assertion that grief is "born of the recognition that lost lands, culture and freedom are in a profound sense irretrievable" (3). The resulting psychological crises are ones not only of the

individual but of a society disassociated from the landscape. Norm Phantom surveys an island full of life, "Yet in reality, the landscape gave the impression of being a dead country" not owned by anyone (*Carpentaria* 292). The description of *being* in the landscape has a long Australian tradition. Hume Nisbet's 1894 short story *The Haunted Station* in which a dilapidated house inhabited by a ghost with physical presence becomes, David Crouch argues, a metonym for the entire country, and the ghost a metonym for Indigeneity ("National Hauntings" 95). The narrator believes he cannot leave what is clearly a frightening environment because "the house has taken possession of me" (Nisbet 121). The encountered ghost has a remarkable exchange with the narrator. "What do you want with me?" the narrator gasps. "To make you myself," the ghost replies (123). The crises of being as depicted in many Australian texts is compounded by three unusual factors. First, the landscape had no consistent referent to the psychologically nurturing European one. The Australian landscape is often depicted as an oscillation between edenic rapture or dismay, and it is often the antithesis of what in European culture is expected from a landscape. Disappointment leads to melancholia (Flatley 39-40). Second, the invading colonial culture was penal. Colonialism as experienced in other countries came much later in the form of selectors and squatters. Initially the invading culture was brutalised, authoritative, and indeed sought to make the entire landscape an inescapable and perfect prison, which in itself was also generative of melancholia. In *Gould's Book of Fish* the Commandant of Sarah Island is described as someone whose Benthamesque "ultimate goal" is "a city where every man could be trusted to be his own gaoler, living in perfect isolation from every other man" (195).

The third element to this triad of melancholia was the experience of the Indigenous, not so much in that it differed from the experiences of any other

indigenous peoples after colonisation, but more for the fact that much of that history was either repressed or eradicated. Wright articulates this in *Plains of Promise*: "The memories were too sad, too bad" (282).

None of these elements by themselves are unique, but in combination give some works in the Australian narrative a very particular and identifiable characteristic. This is the literature of psychic stress brought about by a failure to be situated in the landscape, either because, through an Indigenous optic, the landscape has been appropriated and often literally degraded or because, through the European, Romantic optic it fails to fulfil the redemptive and transcendental qualities expected. In *Gould's Book of Fish* even Japanese sawyers succumb to "an incurable melancholia" inculcated by the dense Tasmanian forest (183). The ontological stress (of failing to be positively situated in the landscape) leads to nihilist and Gothic narrative outcomes. This is what Lynette Russell calls boundary writing, a postcolonial discourse of the bleakest sort. The ontological dichotomies presented in Australian texts which are often thought of as examples of magic realism are far less fabulous than their Latin American counterparts. Australian magic nihilism, while describing a layering of realities as does magic realism, is much more ambiguous, troubling and nihilist in its interpretation of those realities than the magic realism of other countries. From some of the very first accounts of the Australian landscape unfamiliarity, wildness and distance from the centrality of western thought amplified the ontological oscillations described above, as will be demonstrated in the next chapter.

2: Being in the landscape

A curious incident[16] in March, 1803 at Shark Bay on the Western Australian coast illustrates a major proposition of this thesis: that the very way *being* is experienced in the Australian landscape can lead to an unresolvable oscillation between competing ontologies.

Image has been removed as it contains copyright material.

Nouvelle-Hollands: Terre D'Endracht Cabanes des naturels de la Presqu'Île Péron (Péron and Freycinet 136-137)

Nicolas Baudin's scientific expedition, an expedition which had set about exploring much of the Australian coast was preparing to return to France. Baudin's corvettes, the *Géographe* and *Naturaliste,* were anchored off the Péron Peninsula in Terre d'Endracht, a site the expedition had visited two years previously. They knew the area reasonably well, not only from historical accounts but from their previous visit in 1801. The landscape then, as it is now, was principally snaking arid waterways bordered by low sand hills and stunted vegetation. It was hardly the setting for the fantastical situation in which Baudin and his crew soon found themselves.

One morning, several hours after two dinghies of fishermen[17] had been dispatched to go ashore in search of turtle, one dinghy hastily returned. The expedition chronicler Francois Péron wrote that "Fear was still evident in the faces of the crew" who manned the boat, as they blurted out a story of their terrifying encounter with "extraordinarily big, strong men" who "prevented their going ashore" (Cornell 134).

[16] The incident is referred to throughout by the Christine Cornell translation of Peron's journal, and by the original 1816 French, 1816 *Voyage de découvertes…*

[17] Péron calls them "pecheurs" but makes it clear they were a company of sailors.

Péron was told that "a hundred or more" of these "giants" had run along the beach brandishing "great" shields and "enormous[18]" spears while uttering "great long cries[19]". The fishermen had fled, in fear of their lives (134).

Their story was met with "scoffing" (134). Numerous tribes had been encountered during their two years exploring the Australian coast, and the sentimentalist ideal of the noble savage had given way to a more prosaic attitude towards the Indigenous who lived in this mostly arid land. However, the laughter stopped short when the second fishing boat hastily returned. This second boat of fishermen, unaware of the misfortunes of the first, had managed to land on the beach before the giants had appeared, so had "an even closer view of these so-called giants and had only managed with difficulty to escape from them" (135).

Believing the unbelievable

As the fishermen explained the details of their bizarre experience, Péron recalled that his own compatriots, Sub-Lieutenant François Heirisson and Midshipman Charles Moreau, had found "the print of a man's foot, of an extraordinary size" on June 18, 1801 during their reconnaissance of the Swan River (144). He also recalled that two years earlier Louis de Freycinet himself had been "seized with astonishment at the sight of a print of this nature" found in Shark Bay (145-6). With these earlier examples in mind Péron, as a learned naturalist, acknowledged that the eye-witnesses' claims seemed "extravagant", but still held that:

> These various close encounters did not fail to be given credence by the believers in marvels (for there were a few of them among us) and seemed to them to offer,

[18] The original French reads "de grands boucliers et d'énormes sagaies"

[19] Péron writes "hurlements" (howls).

> along with the double report of our fishermen, if not rigorous demonstrations, at least very strong probabilities in support of the existence of a race of giants on these shores. (146)

Soon after Péron set out with a party that had been instructed to make salt from sea-water, a process that would take several days. Péron and two others set out from the main party, trekking across to the other side of the peninsular in search of conchological glory. While naked, waist deep in water collecting shells, Péron relates how he and his companions had to scramble out of the water when they saw about fourteen natives, of the Malgana nation, running along the beach uttering "terrible menacing cries" (146). It was only by bluster, advancing, pretending to be more fully armed than by the one musket and two pistols in their possession, that they escaped the situation. Péron notes that the tallest of the native group was maybe five feet four inches or five feet five inches.[20] The others were of "ordinary height – even small" and all had a "spindliness of limb" (146). The giants had metamorphosed into ordinary men.

Experiential phenomenology and landscape

The fishermen's experience shows that the relationship between self and environment is complex as it rests in part on the issue of where the borders lie between interiority and exteriority, between our perception of the self and our perception of the landscape, and the possibility that self and landscape are a continuum of being. These relationships inform our perception of the ontic, and through it our ontology. Moreover, the interplay between self and environment forms one of the themes of Australian literature. Randolph Stow was to remark in 1961 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

[20] A French inch (*pouce*) at the time was equivalent to about 1.06 English inches. Therefore, the tallest was between five feet eight inches and five feet nine inches.

> that for want of a better term we must call the soul. The external factors, geographical and sociological, are so mingled with his ways of seeing and states of mind that he may find it impossible to say what he means by his environment, except in the most personal and introspective terms ("Some Ideas" 4).

David Malouf, in his Boyer Lecture series of 1998, contends that just as we make landscape, landscape makes us: the concepts of self and landscape become not only interrelated but inter-dependent.

> We are makers, among much else, of landscapes… We remake the land in our own image so that it comes in time to reflect both the industry and the imagination of its makers, and gives us back, in working land, but also in the idealised version of landscape that is a park or garden, an image both of our human nature and our power. ("A Spirit of Play" n.pag.)

Such phenomenological assertions are explored by Maurice Merleau-Ponty, especially in his later works such as *The Primacy of Perception* including his essay "Eye and Mind" and the unfinished *The Visible and Invisible*. In *The Visible and Invisible* Merleau-Ponty proposes that "Ideality is not alien to the flesh, that gives it its axis, its depth, its dimensions" (152). What Merleau-Ponty proposes is the ability to register the environment through the filters of bodily organs of ears, nose, eyes, fingers, is such that it organises the world in a three-dimensional objective space in which the being is just another object. By so doing, sensual perception renders invisible its very role in organising the world. Therefore, in order to rediscover and articulate the physical world, we have to observe our experience through what Thomas Baldwin calls a "sideways" detached look (n.pag.). Experiential observation is something that the Palaeolithic cave painters at Lascaux exploited. The Lascaux rock art incorporates the very shape of the rocks into the painting. If a particular outcrop of rock had the shape of a bison, it became a bison. The use of the three dimensional surface in such a way deeply impressed Merleau-Ponty:

> The animals painted on the walls of Lascaux are not there in the same way as are the fissures and limestone formations. Nor are they elsewhere. Pushed forward here, held back there, supported by the wall's mass they use so adroitly, they radiate about the wall without ever breaking their elusive moorings. I would be hard pressed to say where the painting is I am looking at. ("Eye and Mind" 164)

Image has been removed as it contains copyright material.

The cave paintings at Lascaux. Image: Wiki Commons

An interpretation of the above quote is that the very act of perception: of deciding for example, where the painting stopped and the cave wall started, is always not only culturally mediated, but embodied within one's being. Through such ambiguation, Lascaux offers the "sideways" glance Merleau-Ponty seeks. Tim Winton makes the same point when he writes "much of what we learn about the objects of our attention in the natural world seems to come from out of the corner of the eye" (*Island Home* Kindle loc. 634-635).

Our consciousness is informed and drawn into our sense of being by our sensory extension into the environment via means, such as culture and memory, where the perceiving body is not foreign to that environment. It is only through such mechanisms that we can make elemental sense of pigments on a cave wall. Merleau-Ponty describes this elemental state of being as *la chair* - the flesh. Flesh includes one's self-sensing flesh, but also the "sensible and non sentient" flesh of the world. "Flesh" is also the embodiment of what is sensed, "an anonymity innate to myself" (*Visible and Invisible* 133).

Landscape and self

The conterminous and often contradictory assertions in Australian texts of landscape as being sacred, utilitarian, enrapturing and dispiriting can be in part explained by Merleau-Ponty's theories. Although Merleau-Ponty did not write explicitly on landscape, the above ideas can be applied to the idea that landscape itself informs one's sense of being. Our corporeal entity extends into the very landscape it perceives. By perceiving the world through our corporeal entities, we draw into that experience what we know of the world.

To a large extent we only see of the landscape what we expect, or is within our understanding to see. If what we expect is something strange, alien, inhospitable or inverse to European understanding of landscape, then that in itself can have repercussions for the way being in that landscape is experienced. As Merleau-Ponty put it, "Nothing is more difficult than to know precisely what we see" (*Phenomenology* 58). Yet his phenomenology allows a means of immersion in the natural world that is not of the self but the environment in which the self is expressed and articulated.

The idea that the perception of being and the perception of landscape are integrated has deep resonances with the traditional Australian Indigenous relationship with Country. The ontology of the Dreaming[21] supposes not just an animated landscape, but one which is powerfully linked to present being (R. and C. Berndt 294-295). The land in the Dreaming ontology is sentient and anthropomorphised: literally an embodiment of causal being (Chatwin, Stanner *After the dreaming,* Christie "Ex-centric

[21] Dreaming and Dreamtime are contested translations of what is meant. Alison Ravenscroft ("Carpentaria"), quoting Patrick Wolfe, makes the important point that the association of "dream" and "Aborigine" takes the Indigenous out of time so that they are either "erased from the land or assimilated to it". Josephine Flood (137-138) writes that the word comes from the Arrernte word "alcheringa" which also means "Eternal". She also makes the important point that it does not refer just to a mythological past, but to a force that is here, now: W.E.H. Stanner proposes "Eternal" or "Abiding". He writes ("Religion, Totemism" 146) that the "Dreamtime" is "... much more complex philosophically than we have so far realised."

knowledges", Rose *Nourishing Terrains*). Moreover, Country also partially embodies the self. Deborah Rose, for example, says self-realization is achieved through relationships with people, animals, country and Dreamings ("Indigenous ecologies"). In other words, in the Indigenous account reported by Rose, subjectivity, one's sense of self (and implicitly one's understanding of the other), is not embodied within a particular body. Rather:

> Subjects ... are constructed both within and without; subjectivity is located within the site [and scale] of the body, within the bodies of other people and other species, and within the world in trees, rockholes, on rock walls, and so on. ("Indigenous ecologies" 180)

The above ontology ultimately requires a deep association between being and ecology: it proposes that one is very much influenced and directed by the other. But what happens when the experienced world and the known world conflict, moreover when that confliction happens at the very edges or boundaries of landscape? Postcolonial literature is very much a literature of boundaries and edges and the interplay between two sides of a border. What is unique in the Australian sense, however, is the combination of wilful amnesia, inversion within which landscape elements are the opposite of what is expected, and desires within a landscape of boundaries.

Within both the Indigenous and European sensibilities, these confounding attributes invoke for Merleau-Ponty a "tension" or a "vague feeling of uneasiness" because it is a landscape which calls the perceiver to recognise it, to experience it, in terms of what is previously known, but now denied (*Phenomenology* 271, 15). The ahistoricity thus engendered also has implied consequences for the sense of self. The body is in Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology "an historical object", not a "natural species" ("The Body is its Sexual Being" 198). If there is a wilful desire to see within the

landscape that which is not there, Romantic redemption and European ownership, and to not see that which is there, evidence of prior ownership, then there is the potential for an uneasy oscillation between the desired idea of self and perceived idea of self. The greater the distance between desire and perception, the greater such emotions as anxiety, foreboding and fear.

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"Carrying Large Canoes with the Expedition in Australia", coloured plate from Thomas J. Maslen's The Friend of Australia. The same book includes a map of Australia, including an inland sea labelled "Delta of Australia."

As J.J. Healy points out, the morality and integrity of literature was "most seriously tested" in nineteenth century Australia by the "third cultural reality" of Indigeneity, that is "the sum of meanings which Aborigines had for specific Australians, at specific times, in specific works" (29). The result is, as Healy argues, a litany of attempts to attribute meaning to the Indigenous without reality, or the description of a reality (as in Péron's case) without meaning.

Oscillating ontology at Shark Bay

From a Merleau-Pontian point of view, Péron's account of his encounter with giants is remarkable as an exemplar of not only how landscape informs perception, but of how a contended landscape creates an oscillating ontology, an inability to decide which of two or more competing ontologies is the one which informs being. Some of these points are discussed in detail by Shino Konishi, who has written a number of papers on the Shark Bay incident, including "Inhabited by a race of formidable giants". As Konishi states, the incident challenges the assumption of modern readers that these post-Enlightenment explorers were thoroughly modern, rational and sceptical men. As far as the fishermen were concerned, were not they merely reporting the evidence of

their own eyes? If what one sees is not empirical "reality" then what is?

Unresolved alternatives and oscillating descriptions of reality are a fundamental narrative trope in many Australian fictions. With authors such as Patrick White, Xavier Herbert and David Malouf an alternative bound with landscape provides a metaphysical layering over what would otherwise, in many cases, be purely existentially nihilist texts. The title character in Patrick White's *Voss* has a metaphysical epiphany with the landscape when "he was running into crannies, and sucked into the mouths of the earth, and disputed, and distributed" (266). As David Marr explains, White himself had the anegoic desire to "melt, to merge, to disappear into the landscape" (282). Flanagan and Wright both use the landscape as a characterful force, capable of shaping a protagonist's ontology, thus sharing a narrative technique that can be traced back to Marcus Clarke, Henry Handel Richardson and Barbara Baynton. In an interview with Jean-Francois Vernay, Alexis Wright says "The land is, I suppose, one of or even the central character. Most of the images and ideas relate to the land being alive and having important meaning, which is tied to the ancient roots of our continent" (n.pag.). The landscape became sad and awful, and consequently, to be a being in the landscape engendered melancholy and fear. To be a culturally (and often physically) isolated being in such a landscape, a situation all of the above authors describe, is in Merleau-Pontian terms an existentially nihilistic proposition capable of inducing psychosis. To use Kurt Keller's words, "the wild and chaotic structuring of meaning as angst" which ultimately leads to a delusional and hallucinatory state which completely disrupts one's being as informed by the landscape (17). Certain landscapes, particularly those from which one has either been dispossessed, or those that have been drastically altered, or those beyond one's cultural references, can induce "psychoterratia", that is, psychological outcomes informed by environment (Albrecht).

E. R. Hills proposes a Merleau-Pontian argument with specific regard to the Australian landscape. He writes that all landscapes are perceived through cultural lenses and therefore are not photographic representations of reality …

> … but carefully constructed systems of meaning which help to explain the culture to itself. All the versions of nature which are expressed in Australian landscape imagery are symbolic, often containing within themselves model societies. ("The imaginary life" 13)

Individual stories are informed by the very landscape in which they reside. But, as Henry Reynolds in *Why weren't we told?* and *Forgotten War,* Bruce Pascoe in *Convincing Ground* and *Dark Emu*, Timothy Bottoms and John Pilger write, if those stories suffer amnesia, a lying by omission and the transfer of significance to the insignificant, then the reality becomes false. The landscape in a false reality invites a nihilistic sense of being as it only informs the self through amnesia, omission and insignificance. Paul Carter extends this idea into the concept of "spatial history" which postulates that in describing the perception of landscape, what is described are the thoughts and ideas of the perceiver (*Road to Botany Bay* 294). Describing the self in a spatial history within a landscape culturally overlaid with false reality becomes a potential catalyst of nihilism.

The failure to appreciate just how different the Australian landscape is to the old and new worlds leads to many of Australia's historical narratives having an element of the fantastic about them. One example is in Peter Cunningham's 1827 account of how a group of convicts wishing to go north walked *southwards* from whence cool winds blew, in the hope of reaching Ireland, aided by the *print* of a compass torn from a book (202-203)[22]. Another example is Charles Sturt's 1844 expedition, in which he and his party of 16 hauled whaleboat thousands of kilometres into the dry interior, convinced

[22] He writes further that the conviction of Ireland's proximity to Sydney arose through the realisation that the Blue Mountains to Sydney's west were of the same hue as the hills of Connaught (203).

they would sail an inland sea. Many early convicts were inspired by a conviction that China and Australia were separated by a river just north of Sydney Cove. The delusional belief forms part of the narrative in Richard Flanagan's *Death of a River Guide* when a group of convicts set forth into the bush[23] hoping to reach New Jerusalem, an utopian island situated in the mythical river.

Konishi argues the natives were not recognised as Aboriginal but as "giants" (7). What is intriguing is that while the pursuing Malgana would not have seen themselves as giants, they would have readily attested to there being autochthonous, demiurge giants all around them. Animal and human[24] giants literally formed Country, the Indigenous proposition that their selves, environment, culture and community are part of the one continuum, as evidenced in Indigenous sacred stories throughout Australia (Rose *Nourishing Terrains*). Not only was the belief that spirit ancestors formed the rocks, rivers and trees, in many instances those ancestors were *in themselves* the natural feature. The Indigenous view of Country is still pertinent today: Alexis Wright eulogistically remarks, in French, that:

> Our memories are related to ancestors who live in each place, in each horizon. Their spirits inhabit the spinifex, grass meadows, large trees, solitary plains, the top of the rock hills, and the crystal clear spring waters that flow into our rivers to the sea. (*Croire en l'incroyable* 8) [25]

For the Europeans however, the continent became to be regarded as having a dead empty heart, as J.W. Gregory put it in 1906, and something so far removed from

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[23] "Bush" is used as in the Australian vernacular throughout this thesis to mean wild or uncultivated country.

[24] A. W. Reed writes "The interchange of form between man and animal is often puzzling, and there are times when we cannot be sure whether the hero or the villain of a story is a man or an animal" (5).

[25]The translation into English is by the author of this thesis. The original text reads "Nos souvenirs sont liés aux ancêtres qui demeurent en chaque lieu, sous chaque horizon. Leurs esprits peuplent le spinifex, l'herbe des prairies, les grands arbres, les plaines solitaires, le sommet des collines de rocaille, les eaux de source limpides qui coulent dans nos rivières jusqu'à la mer." Wright wrote this in English, in which it has never been published. The translation into French – the only language in which it has been published, was by Sabine Porter.

suburban and sacred experience as to be objectified for the possibilities of exploitation. Moreover, the disjuncture between what Europeans felt the landscape should be, a representation of *Australia Felix*, and what the landscape also represented as melancholic nihilistic horror created an ontological crisis. As in the case of Xavier Herbert's *Poor Fellow My Country*[26], the suspicion arises that European agency has created the disjunctures between dream and reality.

The unreality of reality is explored by Clifford Geertz who argues for the intersubjectivity of history and Eugene L. Arva who argues that Jean Baudrillard's hyperreality is not a "rhetorical chimera" but a result "of the literary consciousness engaged in coping with and reconstructing the real" (60). Arva places this dualism within a particular genre, but it could equally apply to the frightened fishermen of Baudin's expedition trying to explain the inexplicable:

> Typically, readers of magical realist fiction must look beyond the realistic detail and accept the dual ontological structure of the text, in which the natural and the supernatural, the explainable and the miraculous, coexist side by side in a kaleidoscopic reality ... (Arva 60)

Landscape and perception

Just as the European sense of being was negatively affected by Shark Bay we can infer the Malgana sense of being was positively affected. From the Malgana perspective, the Country was animate, a part of their being, and was their spirit world. The Country was alive with spirit. Ancient songlines meant the whole Malgana being was bound in landscape. Theirs was a geography of immanence, which offered no metaphysical transcendence, but nonetheless imbued the land with spirituality. This was not just a Malgana phenomenon, it was a characteristic of the Indigenous perception of

[26] Herbert dedicates his book "To my poor destructed country."

Country across the continent. The anthropologist Ted (Theodor) Strehlow in his *Songs of Central Australia* writes of the direct intimacy between the land's physical features and individual being:

> Mountains and creeks and springs and water holes are ... the handiwork of ancestors ... recorded in the surrounding landscape [is] the ancient story of the lives and deeds of immortal beings ... who for a brief space may take on human shape once more: beings ... known as fathers and grandfathers and brothers and sisters. The whole countryside is [a] living age-old family tree. (17)

Readers might wonder at the difference between Péron's view of the landscape as hot, inhospitable and dangerous, and what might be imagined as the Malgana's view of a bountiful, spirit affirming, and nurturing landscape. How a story is told is elemental not only to the non-Indigenous imagining of self, but the imagining of Country (Muecke "Landscape of variability").

The Australian postcolonial landscape includes littoral focus, great distances, urban and regional divide and a vast unfamiliar interior. The Australian landscape is profoundly one of edges. The very physicality of Australia is a boundary encompassing edges such as that between the Indigenous and non-Indigenous sections of many Australian towns (Howitt). As Edward S. Casey argues, edges and ends are structures around which "lurk the genuinely unknown and the truly unpredictable" (68). These are areas of violence, both potential and realised. Casey writes "They undermine what resides within the realm of comfortable and conventional thought. They disconnect and discomfort us" (68). The landscape becomes foreboding.

Amnesia, violence, disconnectedness, uneasiness and the erosion of self, the inability to discern the actuality or the "magic" of the figure-ground dichotomy, produce a very particular kind of "magic" "delirium" (Merleau-Ponty "Eye and Mind" 166). When such a landscape is embodied in being that being becomes negated,

melancholic and ontologically equivocal: either the landscape has become potentiated with (often malevolent) psychic force, or the being in the landscape is suffering perceptual psychosis (Edward Martin, Thomas Hansen).

Dispossession of natural landscape

The Shark Bay incident was in every respect a littoral encounter. Not only did it occur at the edge of land and sea, but at the boundary of two cultures which shared little in the way of common reference points. Péron's narrative described an encounter at physical and cerebral boundaries. It is no wonder that an incident so unusual as to be magical occurred.

It is the imagining of the other perceived as the ultimate reality that allowed the terrified fishermen to allow textual imagined accounts of giants to overrule what they themselves had seen for the past two years. What they thought they knew about the indigenous population was filtered heavily by imagination. As Ross Gibson states, "On the upside-down face of the world, perversity could be perceived to be the rule" (10). Given the other perversities which marked the southern land: rivers which ran inland, wood that did not float, and birds which failed to sing[27] or fly, it was not utterly implausible that the inhabitants would be perversely gigantic.

We may infer that to the Malgana the Frenchmen themselves inhabited a different reality. Even if they had come across the muskets, sailing ships, clothing, tobacco tins and jetsam of previous explorations they had no means of explaining how such contrivances worked or what purpose they served. There is no record of the Malgana asking the Frenchmen from what source did they derive their power. Others

[27] The idea of a land full of 'bright birds without song' is one that started some decades later, sometime in the 1820s.

did ask the European invaders, and they were told, in all honesty, it was from their Christian God. This was a description of magic, a magic told in vivid detail by the proselytising missionaries. It was a magic worth having and one bound in text. Not being able to read, the Palawa of Van Diemen's Land, before even recognising themselves as a group of nations, intuitively recognised the importance of European text, and tried their best to obtain it. George Augustus Robinson, the same "Protector" of Aborigines characterised in some of Richard Flanagan's novels, tells of travelling in north eastern Van Diemen's Land in August 1831 and coming across a large Palawa dwelling. A row of fires still burned in front of the dwelling and the ground was "thickly strewed" with emu feathers and kangaroo feathers (Robinson 442-443). In front of the dwelling, Robinson found emu claws, red ochre, and pages from the *Book of Common Prayer* that had been smeared with red ochre (Robinson 442-443 see also Power). The text was therefore recognised as power worth having.

The Shark Bay incident is a particularly Australian incident. There are very few places where the light is so stark, the landscape so unforgiving as the Australian littoral. It is particularly the sun and the heat which lead Péron's party of three to near exhaustion and which possibly informs some of the hallucinatory narratives of the fishermen. As Geoffrey Dutton points out in discussing Xavier Herbert's *Capricornia*, a novel which in some respects can be argued to have inspired Alexis Wright's *Carpentaria*[28], it is as if in order to write convincingly and using a language that registers our presence within the Australian place we need to exceed the bounds of novelistic realism (Dutton 217-8).

[28] Alison Ravenscroft quotes Wright as saying she "has no time read" Herbert (*The Postcolonial Eye* 70). Nicholas Birns, in a note to the author, writes he "was told by both Nicholas Jose and Jeanine Leane that Alexis Wright objects to *Capricornia* being seen as the inspiration for *Carpentaria*" (2017).

Conclusion: the characteristics of magic nihilism

There are several characteristics which are individually and in various combinations found throughout Australian literature. Those characteristics together demarcate a type of literature this thesis calls magic nihilism. Magic nihilism characteristics, as discussed in the preceding two chapters can be summarised as follows:

First, there is within Australian literature a genre of text where the landscape not only acts as a mediator between alternate, often conflicting, perceptions of reality, but also as a characterological force, what Paul Carter describes as a landscape not only in possession of moral qualities, but metaphysical ones as well (*Dark Writing* 234). The result is a uniquely Australian response to Romanticism in that it adds another metaphysical layering to the narrative. Often these texts use narrative devices that fall easily into theories concerning postcolonial magic realism. However, a more unifying element is the Romantic regard for the landscape, and the description of Gothic horror in attempting to situate oneself in that landscape and to appropriate it from its original owners. The very way the landscape is perceived becomes not only a mediator between the conflicting realities of the Indigenous, the European, and the European *imagining* of the indigenous, but part of the conflict itself (Rose *Nourishing Terrains,* Van Toorn "Writing Never arrives Naked"). The interplay between these conflicting realities and the animate Australian landscape has culminated in works which attempt to go beyond realism in order to reconcile what A.L. McCann calls the "toxic legacy of colonialism" with the settler fixation on Romantic relationships with landscape ("The Literature of Extinction" 54). These attempts, as exemplified by Flanagan and Wright, provide new creative force and narrative possibilities, albeit ones which are both constrained and undermined by a Romantic metaphysical framework. As demonstrated at the beginning of this chapter, a landscape which limits or inhibits White ways of being becomes a

landscape open to magical and malevolent possibilities.

Second, while both magic realism and magic nihilism explore competing ontologies, only in magic nihilism are competing ontologies contained within the one protagonist, offering the possibility of perceptual psychosis as an explanation of the magical events depicted. D.M. Thomas' *The White Hotel* depicts the psychological angst of Lisa, and the hallucinatory events, red leaves, a pod of whales and falling stars triggered by psychological trauma. They are events, according to Lisa's omnisciently narrated story-within-a-story that are experienced by all the hotel guests. If the events are manifestations of psychosis, they are manifestations of a group psychosis. The inference is that as far as all the protagonists are concerned, the events have happened. In magic nihilism the reliability of the account is often called into question. Oblivia in *The Swan Book* jostles with ghosts in the crowded cab of the Fresh Food People truck, but there is no indication that the truck driver is aware of them (297). *The White Hotel* offers sexual repression as a possible reason behind Lisa's psychosis. In similar vein, magic nihilism offers reasons for the psychotic experiences of its principal protagonists. These reasons invariably include a profound dis-ease in experiencing the landscape, as in Patrick White's *Voss*, and a profound dis-ease with history. Aljaz's hallucinations in *Death of a River Guide* are personal, and are explicitly of the landscape and history. "Why do I feel as if I am being destroyed by history?" Aljaz wonders (*River Guide* 264). Furthermore, Aljaz finds himself in a "gorge of death" because he has ignored the "language" of the river, "the shushing of the bending tea-trees", "the swirls of the river" and the "ebbs and flows" (*River Guide* 296-297).

Third, magic nihilism is a nihilist literature where the main protagonists' identities are constantly being erased or negated. Angel Day in *Carpentaria* finds herself without agency, catching snakes by a foully polluted river, prompting The Fishman to

ask "What am I?" to which the narrator replies "He was a blackfella" (Carpentaria 452-3). Indeed, the ontological confliction brought about by the experience of being Indigenous in a colonised society informs often hallucinatory psychotic and nihilistic scenes in Flanagan's *Gould's Book of Fish*, *Wanting*, *The Narrow Road To The Deep North* and in all of Wright's novels.

Fourth, magic nihilism is a spectrally challenged literature. The ghosts are not just beings seeking justice or the restoration of order despite only being able to interact minimally with the material world, but are often beings with full physical presence and full agency just as their material equivalents presumably possessed. Furthermore, such ghosts are often of the landscape itself, and are imbued with menace and melancholy. Texts often imply they are also markers of historical trauma.

Fifth, the landscape in magic nihilism is a characterful force, often possessed of more agency that the protagonists who are pummelled, drowned, burnt, lost and frozen by its agency. The landscapes depicted are often bleak, degraded, rubbish-strewn or if described as beautiful Arcady, are done so in conjunction with such adjectives as "terrifying". There are exceptions to the rule. *The Narrow Road To The Deep North* for example, proffers competing ontologies, that of the Japanese and that of the prisoners of war, but those ontologies are not contained within the one character. Those exceptions are discussed in Chapter nine.

The nihilism in Flanagan's and Wright's novels is reflective of the melancholy extant throughout those works. It is possible for nihilism to offer hope through the argument that if there is no God (because there is no meaning to existence) then the soul is not encumbered by imposed law. Neither Flanagan nor Wright produce works that are conventionally uplifting, or inspirational. The happiest ending Flanagan can muster is Aljaz becoming one with a sea-eagle, and Wright can only offer the hopeful

promise of Norm to his grandson, that things will be better "One day" (*Carpentaria* 515). In general, Wright seems more at ease with her landscapes than Flanagan with his, a feature of her writing which is characteristic of many Indigenous novels, as discussed in Chapter Seven. Other characteristics are often, but not universally, found in magic nihilism. The subversion of authority, of particular tropes of writing, and the employment of a dry laconic humour are markers of a particularly Australian way of writing and are devices often, but not universally, used by Flanagan and Wright.

The above elements of magic nihilism are not derivative characteristics from Latin American writing, and if they are postcolonial they are peculiarly self-reflexive in their fascination with postcolonial and Romantic concerns. That magic nihilism and its constituent parts have characterised some of Australia's literature since colonial times, and are still interrogated in the modern era by Flanagan and Wright will be demonstrated in the next seven chapters.

3: Magic and nihilism in the colonial landscape 1788-1901

Introduction

The Australian colonial period produced texts and issues that are still being interrogated by Flanagan and Wright, and as such is part of the demonstration that Flanagan's and Wright's magic nihilism is part of a continuum in Australian literature. The beginning point of the colonial period is arguably the date of European occupation in 1788. The end point is arguably the federation of the six Australian colonies in 1901, a federation brought about in large part by a desire to restrict and control Chinese immigration[29]. Nonetheless, literature that is colonial in both concerns and setting, such as Baynton's 1902 *Bush Studies*, Richardson's 1917 *Fortunes of Richard Mahony* and Furphy's 1903 *Such is Life* add imprecision to the end date of the colonial era. Australia was throughout the period a contested landscape in terms of ideas concerning land ownership and the relationship between individual and landscape. Indigenous, colonial government, settler and squatter claims to the land confounded ownership. The Australian landscape's antithetical characteristics to British landscape also confounded the relationship. Long into the twentieth century, Australia

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Frederick McCubbin The Pioneer 1904. The painting narrative and the singular title not only says much about Australian gendered attitudes to the landscape, but also refers to the melancholy and ghostly stillness which pervade much of how Australian landscape is regarded. National Gallery of Victoria image: en.wikipedia.org.

[29] The *Immigration Restriction Act 1901* was the first bill passed by the new parliament (Johanson 13-14).

saw itself in many ways as an antipodean outpost of the British Isles. However, much of the way Australian landscape was described was in direct or implicit comparison to British landscapes. The comparisons created a binary, evidenced from such examples as Barron Field extolling the refreshing virtues of the Bathurst district, in a drought year, for its Englishness: "so different - so English - is the character of the scenery" (*Memoirs* 443). Colonisers, the Indigenous, convicts and settlers, pioneers as well as natural events such as drought flood and bushfire, were all seen as contesting forces whose effects were often inscribed on the landscapes concerned. The binaries also confounded imported Picturesque and Romantic ideals concerning landscape. Paul Kane argues Romanticism failed to establish itself in Australian literature in anything other than its lacuna, grounded in "absence or negativity" (5). According to Kane, Romanticism simply "did not happen" in Australia (10). What passed for Romanticism was at the start obsessed with hauntings and ghosts as in Henry Kendall's 1869 "Ghost Glen" or "The Last of his Tribe". It was also equally obsessed with the psychological impact a landscape of dis-ease had on the individual as in Kendall's "The Glen of Arrawatta". Despite Kane's argument, it is apparent from a number of texts, including passages in Flanagan's and Wright's works that Australia's home-grown haunted Romanticism fitfully started and then stayed very late in Australian cultural expression, and in so doing also acquired some of the psychological overlays to the movement which were exemplified by Gothic horror, Nietzschean nihilism, and the early explorations of human psychology. Australian Romantic expression also developed a capacity, intentional or otherwise, to undermine itself, and to make suspect the very Romantic virtues it extolled. For example, Banjo Paterson, whose masculinised yearning for an invented and mythologised past resulted in his 1890 "The Man From Snowy River" wrote poems and essays Romantically celebrating the non-Indigenous ownership of the land. But in attempting to imbue the landscape with late Romantic nationalism,

Paterson almost necessarily negated Indigenous claims of ownership. He makes the point clear in "Australia for the Australians":

> The howling black savages of the interior of this continent ... believe in ... a positive check to the increase of population ... They do this ... in a wonderfully fertile country where the population is about one nigger to the square league. (n.pag.)

In such a view, the Romantic concern for seeking redemption in Nature is only possible by negating any Indigenous claim to that Nature. Paterson's racist exuberance for its potentialities imbued readers, even then, of a suspicion that either or both descriptions of landscape did not reflect any actuality.

How the self is situated in the landscape has political potency, so much so that a Romantic "past" eulogised by painters such as Arthur Streeton and Tom Roberts, and writers such as Banjo Patterson were recognised as fictions even when first created. The notion of a "pioneer legend" which celebrated "the taming of the new environment to man's uses" is described by historian John Hirst (316). The legend was first expressed in newspapers and magazines of the 1890s, and lampooned by *The Bulletin* and by the likes of Francis Myers, the "Telemachus" of the Melbourne *Argus,* who in 1889 described Australian "pioneers" as "you boys of the old brigade, you heroes who imagine, every man of you, that you deserve a statue and a pension ... " (Myers 13).[30] The complete emptiness of the masculine colonial pioneering hero myth was fully explored some decades later in Brian Penton's 1934 *The Landtakers* and Xavier Herbert's 1938 *Capricornia.*

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[30] It's interesting that Richard Flanagan shares something of Myers' environmental concern and disdain for official history. Compare Flanagan's articles in *Tasmanian Time.com* with Myers's views such as "We have been tearing down all the natural fringes of our rivers, swamps, and lagoons to pave the way of the iron horse through this continent ... to put down streets that might be kept smooth and clean as the shining floors of Mexican drawing rooms in our great cities, to make us piers and bridges, and permanent, almost everlasting, ways of all sorts. "Progress for the people, destruction for the forests," has been an almost universal Australian motto. A very mean motto, expressing a very bad policy, which has already led to disaster" (n.pag.).

The penal nature of much of colonial Australia for the most part of the earlier nineteenth century and the practicalities of just surviving meant Romanticism "never seemed to sit well with Australian poets" (Kane, 19). By the end of the century the Romanticism found in poets like Paterson and painters like Roberts referred to a past long gone and possibly one that never existed. Romantic expectations of landscape in Australian texts are rarely convincingly fulfilled. The inability to situate the landscape precisely within Romantic concerns creates a tension between expectation and actuality, which establishes an oscillating ontological binary that is unresolvable. The landscape is treated as simultaneously something nurturing and something malevolent. Roland Boer believes the dualistic attitude of the non-Indigenous towards the target country, Australia, and source country, England not only situates Australia as an unblessed country but creates an unfulfillable longing for the source country ("God's Purpose" 38). The binary is very much a construct of what is expected of a landscape and what it actually delivers.

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Like so many images of the era, Fearnleigh Montague's Mount Warning New South Wales 1875 (Art Gallery of New South Wales) says more about the artist's expectation of landscape than the actuality of the landscape represented: the alleged subject becomes unrecognisable. The dissimilarity between the above image and the actual mountain is profound. Image: WikiCommons.

The contested landscape

Colonial writers often lacked positive emotional engagement with the landscape they described, possibly because emotional engagement, to be at ease in a landscape "alienated from its Aboriginal occupants" is a difficult thing to achieve (Smith *European*

Vision and the South Pacific ix). For example, reviewing Catherine "Katie" Langloh Parker's *Australian Legendary Tales* of 1896, an anonymous critic in the Adelaide *Advertiser* wrote

> "… it has often been remarked how powerful is the influence exerted upon the national imagination by physical characteristics; and in the sombre, melancholy, featureless bush there is … a sense of the terrible and uncanny," ("Recent Publications" 6).

Bernard Smith noted Marcus Clarke, like the early poet Barron Field, claimed Australia "lacked the human associations of an historic past" (Smith *Documents* 129). Clarke wrote, "but this our native or adopted land has no past, no story" (Clarke "Preface" n.pag.). The landscape held man and nature in a timeless present. For Clarke, nature, alienated as it was from man, became sinister. Moreover, the elements of Australian landscape antithetical to Romantic description such as its monotony meant that Romantic expression was often achieved through simply describing what wasn't there: a process of attempting to Romanticise the landscape through negativity (Kane, 36).

A demythologised landscape becomes "barren" "melancholic" "funereal" and "frightful" until new mythologies are invented, or other mythologies appropriated (Clarke "Preface" n.pag.). A landscape without referential myth impedes imagining and belonging. Unresolved, what we are left with is silence and malevolence, because, as Les Murray points out in "Noonday Axemen": "men must have legends, or else they will die of strangeness." Any mythology which does not take into account the actualities of the landscape and its history is at best going to lack verisimilitude. From an historical perspective Australia is presented as a new or ancient land that is empty or inhabited, dead or alive, spiritual or spiritless, either, as Suzanne Braun-Bau argues, an Arcady or a Botany Bay (1). The binary oppositions suggest a difficulty in defining the landscape in ways which affirm the situation of self in that landscape. For example, the artist

Thomas Watling described a landscape, the road to Parramatta, in a letter to his aunt in a way which so unequivocally undermines the Romantic intention that it leads to what Mikhail Bakhtin called a "comic verbal composition", a trait of what Bakhtin termed the "carnivalesque" where the solemnities and rituals of the quotidian are profanely overturned, and opposites co-mingled, often with a resulting whiff of chaotic humour brought about by *argumentum ab auctoritate,* appeal to authority (Morris "Folk Humour and Carnival Laughter" 126). Watling struggled with his description of Parramatta Road in 1794, writing:

> The elysian scenery of a Telemachus; - the secret recesses for a Thomson's musidora; - arcadian shades, or classic bowers, present themselves at every winding to the ravished eye. (Bernard Smith 10)

Watling goes on to complain about the lack of off-scapes[31] and concludes "The face of the country is deceitful; having every appearance of fertility; and yet productive of no one article in itself fit for the support of mankind" (10). Watling's description is not only inauthentic as the use of classic and eighteenth century allusion obfuscates the description,[32] but indecisive: does the road traverse a fecund or deceitful landscape?

Watling's dilemma can be explained by Maurice Merleau-Ponty's theories on the situationist[33], as opposed to the geometric scientific mapping concept of spatiality.[34] One's orientation and situation within the landscape is a product of situationist forces

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[31] Off-scapes refers to the side scenes of a landscape through which the landscape may reveal itself. It is a painterly device that was used extensively.

[32] The scene he refers to is from James Thomson's 1727 poem "Summer" in which a nude bathes oblivious to a hidden male gaze. The poem inspired many paintings in the nineteenth century.

[33] The theory that behaviour is essentially a result of external stimuli. "In principle," writes Merleau-Ponty, "all my changes of place figure in a corner of my landscape, they are recorded on the map of the visible. Everything I see is on principle within my reach, at least within reach of my sight, and is marked upon the map of the "I can." Each of the two maps is complete. The visible world and the world of my motor projects are each total parts of the same Being" ("Eye and Mind" 164).

[34] David Seamon summarises the Merleau-Ponty ideas on this more succinctly than most when he writes: "The central problem of philosophy for Merleau-Ponty is the 'origin of the object in the very centre of our experience'. He concludes that this centre is the body, particularly its function as intelligent subject" (*Geography of the Life World* 46).

such as history, culture and even resource availability. Graeme Turner asserts that "our view of the country is not created by history in any simple way. Rather, it is produced by the culture's mythologising of its history" compromising any possibility of non-Indigenous reconciliation with landscape (*National Fictions* 34). Apperception, as in Watling's case, or wilful amnesia brought about by deliberate mythologising necessarily obscures and confounds any avenue by which landscape may be approached.

The interaction between landscape and self informs the individual perception of reality. Phenomenologically, the Australian landscape then becomes an engendering agent either for the desire of Romantic redemption which is perhaps never fulfilled, resulting in complete nihilism, or an attempt to resurrect the perceived Indigenous response to landscape, to in fact invent a new indigeneity. The perception is somewhat one-sided. Although there are notable exceptions such as in Kendall's lush descriptions in "Bell Birds" or "September in Australia", rarely is the Australian colonial landscape seen in terms of unqualified beauty, nurture or sacredness. Paul Miller, discussing the works of colonial travel writers Thomas Walker, Joseph Hawdon and George Bennett makes the point that Australian colonial travel writing often used Picturesque expressions to indicate economic value. "English park" became shorthand to indicate good cattle pasture potential in a landscape and monotony signified purposelessness (Miller 54). The description of such landscapes also tends to engender an ontological friction, not only between the self and the world, the figure and the ground, but between their competing claims for supremacy. The desire for redemptive qualities in landscape is conflicted between Romantic concerns, unrecognised Indigenous spiritual concerns and economic utility.

Landscapes that are not of the self also engender a Foucauldian heterotopia of deviation, the perception of the space surrounding and defining one's self is of the

other, and therefore not informative in terms of one's own perception of being. Australia was historically viewed as a perfect prison, but its heterotopian characteristics are deeper than that. In the above instances the corporeal self is not affirmed in the "geographical environment" of the landscape as Merleau-Ponty would have it, but disassociated (*The Structure of Behaviour*: 142-153). The situation immediately establishes a nihilistic ontological dilemma that is often irreconcilable and non-veridical. Kerryn Goldsworthy argues Australianness resides in a sense of place often being "sinister" and "harsh" while David Carter, quoting Harry Heseltine, writes confrontation with the land is among the elements in which reside "the terror at the basis of being" (Goldsworthy 117, Carter 275). Because mythopoesis based on appropriation and antithesis lacks validity, a situation is established where the landscape is not "assimilated" (Judith Wright "Perspective" 72). When landscape is not assimilated, being is not validated: the ontology of being is not resolved, but is confounded between competing possibilities.

The evolution of ghosts

Ghosts change their character during the colonial period: they evolve from beings seeking justice, and perhaps even showing how that justice might be obtained, as is the case of the ghost in John Lang's 1859 "The Ghost Upon the Rail", to beings that are materialised through guilt, loss and longing, not of the ghost itself, but of the observer, such as Nisbet's 1893 "The Haunted Station". Moreover, the early assured exteriority of ghosts slowly changes to a situation where there is a blurring between the exterior and interior haunted landscape (Wilding 143). Ghosts become not so much something external to one's psyche, but a creation of it. As such, ghosts imply an ontological anxiousness, as they project an ontology that may or may not be there, as evidenced by the tendency to discredit such apparitions in the same texts as they appear. Henry Lawson's narrator, telling the ghost story "We called him 'Ally' for short" says "I

don't believe in ghosts … [they are] a nuisance and a bore" (168). In many cases there is complete uncertainty as to whether the ghost exists, or like Banquo, can only be seen by a principal protagonist suffering a psychosis. Indeed, Gerald Gaylard draws a direct correlation between psycho-social disease and gothic thanatophillia, the love of death. He explains thanatophillia as being the opposite of eros and biophilia. The conflict between the two creates a nihilistic tendency toward "extinction and undifferentiation", which explains the "repetition automatism" whereby sufferers mechanically repeat traumas (3). Such ghosts, argues Gaylard are "the manifestation of repressed anxieties, Derrida's hauntology" punning on the French pronunciation of *ontologie* (3). The physical manifestation of such interior angst was not necessarily limited to ghosts, but included metanymic haunting by other creatures of the imagination as Rosa Campbell Praed's short story *The Bunyip* published in 1891, demonstrates. Gelder and Weaver write that *The Bunyip* is a remarkable story because it is one which doesn't so much posit that bunyips *do* exist as the *idea* they *might* exist (*Uncanny Australia* 117). This idea has contemporary resonances in such instances as Don Watson's claim that the "bush" is both real and imaginary: imaginary in that it harbours the life of the Australian mind (Watson 66). Similar ideas are expressed in Flanagan's *Narrow Road,* that the Tasmanian west coast is made of equal parts "rainforest and myth", and David Tacey's assertion of the Australian paradox, that disconnection from land results in spiritual desiccation through the nihilistic triad of fear, doubt and inadequacy (Flanagan 221, Tacey "Falling Down to Earth" 112). While Praed goes to some trouble to have the reader believe that bunyips could possibly exist, *The Bunyip* plays upon the fear of the inarticulated idea itself, a narrative device which shares many commonalities with the European Gothic, and which was used successfully in later narratives including Lindsay's *Picnic at Hanging Rock* and Cook's *Wake in Fright*.

The idea that a bunyip might exist is so powerful that in the story it is not necessary for the bunyip to be even sighted. The main characters, disorientated in the night bush, hear strange noises which they think *might* be a bunyip. They come across a Freudian idyll: the body of a dead child apparently slain by a snake which slithers away only on their discovery of the corpse. The entire story, like so much of Australian fiction at the time, is melancholic. The very idea of bunyip in Praed's story is one which is informed by the landscape:

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The frontispiece to Arthur J Vogan's self-illustrated 1890 The Black Police entitled Queensland Squatters "Dispersing" Aborigines. Image courtesy British Library.

> It was a dreary uncanny place, and even through our coo-ëës the night that had seemed so silent on the plain was here full of ghostly noises and unexpected gurglings and rustlings and husky croaks, and stealthy glidings and swishing ... (123).

The coo-ëës[35] so silent on the plain, and the lonely place so full of ghostly noises situates the idea of bunyip with death, dispossession and tragedy. The bunyip becomes a metaphor for Indigeneity, and the anxiousness inherent in White attitudes to the Indigenous (Gelder and Jacobs *Uncanny Australia* 33, Ravenscroft *The Postcolonial Eye* 83-87). One of the tropes of Australian colonial literature is of the ghostly Indigenous presence. In "The Bunyip" those ghosts have metamorphosed into a creature more of European than Indigenous creation. Praed, interestingly, reinvented her entire

[35] Coo-ëë is a Dharuk (Sydney region) word meaning "come here", now part of the Australian vernacular. For the non-Indigenous it has acquired as much national significance as the phrase "Fair dinkum."

relationship with the Indigenous. Praed's father Thomas Murray-Prior[36], was one of the notorious "Browns", a vigilante group which went on a six-week rampage[37], killing any of the Yeeman people they could find, following the murder of 11 of the Fraser family[38] at Hornet Bank station on October 26, 1857. Praed, although a child of only six[39], was very much aware of the incident. She imbued it with personal recollection which would have been highly unlikely. In her memoirs *My Australian Girlhood and Australian Life; Black and White*, Praed suggests that not only did she witness a rehearsal of the Hornet Bank murders as she claims she secretly attended a corroboree in which the anticipated murders were rehearsed in dance, but the reprisals by the Browns. Praed writes:

> I love the Blacks ... I think that the natives have not deserved their fate nor the evil that has been spoken of them. It was mainly the fault of the Whites that they learned treachery, and were incited to rapine and murder. (4)

Praed in this imagining of her witnessing and role in these events[40] tries to establish a self that on the one hand is sympathetic towards the Indigenous, "I love the blacks" but on the other describes them, quite literally, as murderous rapacious cannibals who bring about the circumstances of their own extermination. The unresolvable binary leads to a situation where to the non-Indigenous observer landscape and Indigeneity become one, creating a "vague terror":

> - the terror of wild Blacks, blending in imagination with the eldritch shapes of the old gum-trees, the grey moss draping their twisted limbs, and the red gum dropping like stalactites of blood from gashes made by the Black's tomahawks in their branches. (*Australian Girlhood* 55)

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[36] Murray-Prior was a good friend of Ludwig Leichhardt.

[37] Bruce Elder, in recounting the massacre, states the Browns found a group of Yeeman near Piggot's station who had "Bibles and prayer books from Hornet Bank" (145). The notion that European power lay in the written form of their scriptures is suggestive of George Augustus Robinson's account of the scriptural pages smeared with Ochre by the Palawa.

[38] Bruce Elder writes that the sons John, 23, and David, 16, were systematically raping Yeeman.

[39] Praed was born on March 27, 1851.

[40] Praed was six: given her age and the racial tensions in the Dawson River area throughout 1856 and 1857, it is difficult to believe she managed to secretly observe a corroboree.

In Australian colonial literature certain horrors emerge: the horror of the Indigenous contemplating a murdered future, the European attempting to reconcile a brutal past, an inability either through Romantic misunderstanding or obliterated culture to situate oneself within the landscape; to be identified as part of the landscape. Some, including Gerry Turcotte, Ken Gelder, Kathleen Steele, and Rachael Weaver call this "Australian Gothic" but that term doesn't quite get to the nub of the characteristics of this type of writing. Certain Gothic elements such as the curse, the passageway, the fainting heroine and the haunted castle are readily translated to the abandoned bark hut, but the horrors of the European Gothic are more immediately contrived than Australian works, which deal for more directly with a Jamesean underlying psychological inability to negotiate between the self and the external world. The child in "The Bunyip" is emblematic of the psyche, lost in an overwhelming landscape devoid of cultural reference points, and it is one of many instances. For example, Marcus Clarke's 1873 "Pretty Dick", a child-lost-in-the-bush story, describes a bush bathed in a sun "that seemed to be everywhere at once" (64). The bush accumulatively becomes "hot", "dry and cracked", "strange", and "interminable" to the point where Pretty Dick is overtaken by a "strange feeling of horror, and despair" until subsumed by the "whole horror of the bush" he starts imagining a "shapeless Bunyip" "dragging its loathsome length to where he lay" (64, 65, 65, 69, 70, 72, 72).

The adversarial landscape

Colonial Picturesque description of landscape grew out of a longing to assert ownership of landscape. Its tropes were used extensively throughout the nineteenth century to depict the reaches of British Empire, affirming ownership of foreign lands. Paul Carter writes of the Picturesque formulaically enabling the representation of nature's "use-value" and "the need to appropriate this wealth" (*The Road to Botany Bay*

287). This way of describing things becomes a "language of appropriation" that has resonances with the language of scientific inquiry (Carter 287). That much of the landscape thus described was marginal and flat country confounded many a description of Australian landscape. Was it Picturesque or monotonous? A monotonous landscape by its very immutability is one that threatens a sense of self in the landscape, as that sense of self is dependent on being an agent within the landscape. Without agency, self-hood cannot be constructed from the environment. Paul Miller argues that this unease within the landscape ultimately leads to a process of rediscovery, but the process of establishing a "cultural identity" must necessarily be traumatic. "It is … in a monotonous forest that cultural identity is most stressed and the subjectivity of [a] traveller is most intimately revealed" (56).

The Picturesque lent classical gravitas and meaning to colonialism. The Picturesque also attempted to appropriate landscape, not only to signify outward possession but "inward possession" (Miller 52). Livio Dobrez makes the further point that this internalisation "requires for its completion, inward possession, guaranteed only by (apparent) dispossession and loss. Identity comes to birth in its own dying, that is in uncertainty, as a question" (39).

Early accounts of the Australian landscape were often Romantic, melancholic and haunted. Melancholic and haunted Romanticism is stressed Romanticism, offering possibilities that undermine the very notion of Romanticism itself. Describing the works of Fitzgerald and Poe, Adam Gopnik writes stressed Romanticism is a begetter of Expressionism where veracity only lies within the subjective experience (n.pag.). Henry Handel Richardson pays as much attention to the landscape as she does to Richard Mahony's mental decline. The confounding of the subjective experience by unresolvable and competing ontologies again leads to magic nihilism. The nihilistic

ambivalence denies the self. Contemplating a gum leaf, Barron Field[41] decries "[t]here is no flesh and blood in it: it is not of us, and is nothing to us" (*Geographical Memoirs* 423). The leaf should mean something, but it does not. Worse, it becomes the antithesis of the flesh and blood affirmation a leaf should possess. This ambivalence pervades much of the historical non-Indigenous view of Australian landscape even to the present time, a view which struggles with ideas of metaphysical redemption through regard of landscape and its features (McLean n.pag.). This is contrasted with notions of Australian landscape being "nothing", antithetical to Romantic and Picturesque ideals, or psychically overwhelming and malevolent (Turcotte 10-19, Steele 43, Schaffer 22-23).

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John Glover, 1838 Natives on the Ouse River, Van Diemen's Land, Art Gallery of NSW. The scene is Arcadian and has no reference to the near obliteration of the Palawa from the Tasmanian mainland over the previous decade.

The Australian landscape was simultaneously described in terms of Picturesque ownership, and resulting Romantic ideals, or as boring, monotonous (Douglas 77, Field *Memoirs* 430-443, Carter *The Road to Botany Bay* 247). Further, landscape combined a "threatening" amalgam of Indigeneity and landscape (Steele 43). Even from the coast, the landscapes Péron and Flinders respectively describe, the bleak low hills, grey green vegetation and too-bright light threaten to force a new sense of self divorced from Romantic sensibilities. Paul Miller explains the point well:

[41] According to *The Historical Records of Australia* (Watson S1: V10: 814) "the verses are very poor" and received the "apt criticism" "Thy poems, Barron Field, I've read/ And thus adjudge their meed - / So poor a crop proclaims thy head / A barren field indeed."

> As seen through the eyes of … nineteenth century travellers in Australia, the Picturesque landscape appears as a culturally constructed aesthetic. It is a landscape to which a cultural identity is applied. A monotonous landscape conversely is one that acts upon and can generate personal identity precisely because it is free from the inveteracy of received cultural tradition. ("Monotony and the Picturesque" 56)

Only the possibility of new identity is yielded by the above view. Logically, if existing identity cannot be forged through the landscape – and the Western aesthetic assumes it can – then what is left is a lacuna and an invitation to existential nihilism (Shepard 34).

Possibly as a result of this haunted antithesis to the European, the Australian landscape is often depicted as a melancholic response to Romanticism. Australia did produce works which fit Romantic theory, such as some of Slessor's and Harpur's poetry. But often Australian Romanticism was expressed in ways so peculiar they undermined the very metaphysics they sought to promote. "Ludic" Australian Romanticism's main effect was the subversion of Romanticism itself (Cousins 157).

Romanticism also fuelled the desire to remythologise the Australian landscape, and seek from that remythologisation a confirmation of Nature's worth. Ivor Indyk ("Lecture on shyness") quotes Kenneth Slessor on Charles Harpur's 1867 "The Creek of the Four Graves" (a poem in itself wonderfully illustrative of many of the conflictions concerning self, landscape and indigeneity discussed in this thesis.) Several lines of Harpur's poem stand out for Slessor:

> From either bank, or duskily befringed
> With upward tapering feathery swamp-oaks -
> The sylvan eyelash always of remote
> Australian waters, whether gleaming still
> In lake or pool, or bickering along
> Between the marges of some eager stream. (Harpur *Poems* n.pag. 23-28)

"Just as suddenly," Slessor writes, "I perceived the flash and glitter of those Australian waters as if a blazing slit of eye had half-opened and half-closed over an

enormous distance" (Slessor 70). Indyk says this is the description of an intimate wink (n.pag.). This intimate tenderness is rare: Australian landscape when it is seen intimately, is often seen rapaciously: something to be conquered, intruded, even penetrated. As Tim Winton writes those who have used the land may feel a "closer feeling to country, even an intimacy of sorts," yet historically those same agents "have engaged in a long action of subjugation from which they are yet to fully relent" (*Island Home* Kindle loc. 689-94). Force yields only disappointment. Elizabeth Ferrier, quoted by Margaret Somerville argues, "colonisation is primarily a spatial conquest and postcolonial transformations require new ways of understanding and representing ourselves in space" (5). If the colonised landscape is an "inversion" "deceitful" "silent" possibly even "dead" then the ways in which the coloniser can affirmatively represent the self in that space become limited (Watling, Clark, Gregory).

Jacques Lacan's evaluation of Merleau-Ponty phenomenology enabled some of the ideas he proposed in "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the I". Landscape's ability in the Western imagination to generally facilitate a Lacanian *stade du mirior,* enabling an apperceptual regard of the ego brings forward the possibility that some aspects of the adversarial Australian landscape are not a result of antipodean geography and geology, but of European creation. If we, as David Malouf argues in his 1998 Boyer lecture, are makers of landscape which in turn, from a Merleau-Pontian view, makes us, what does that say about psychological well-being when the landscape we make is apocalyptic? What can be said about the colonial regard for Australian landscape when geographical names include Hell Hole Creek, Mt Desolation, Mt Misery, Mt Horror, Mt Dreadful, Mt Despair, and, a personal favourite, Linger and Die Hill? Indeed, to the extent that history is written on the landscape, what can be said about place names that include Nigger's Bounce, Blood-Hole, Skeleton Creek, Skull Pocket, Murdering Creek,

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William Strutt 1864, Black Thursday, February 6th 1851. The evident Terror, the momento mori arrangement of bones imbue this painting with an apocalyptic energy. As Robert Kenny says "Surely, this is Australian nature yelling at the settlers, GET BACK!" (Gardens of Fire 119) *Image: State Library of Victoria.*

Murdering Plains, Murdering Island or Massacre Island?[42]

The melancholic and nihilistic landscape

In its persistence in Australian literature, Romanticism often mutated to a literature of melancholy, a colonial literary trope which persisted well into the twentieth century. When Marcus Clarke wrote his critique of Louis Buvelôt's "Waterpool near Coleraine" to accompany a photograph of the painting published by the National Gallery of Victoria, there was still an effort to see beyond the landscape to its metaphysical import, but any sense that this was a sublime experience had been abandoned. Although discussing painting, Clarke believed his ideas had literary application. A large section of the critique was used afterwards by Clarke in 1876 in his preface of Adam Lindsay Gordon's book of melancholic poetry *Sea Spray and Smoke Drift,* a preface which likens the "dominant note of Australian scenery" with the "weird melancholy" of Edgar Allan Poe's poetry:

[42] Mark O'Connor in his poem "The View from Mt Buggery" makes a similar point: The Faithful Massacre,/Darkies Leap,/Mount Dispersal,/Hell's Window,/Valley of Destruction,/Square Head Jinny,/Mt Exhaustion,/ Mt Disappointment,/ Disappointment Spur,/The Devil's Elbow,/ The Bastard's Neck,/ The Pimple,/Terrible Hollow,/ The Devil's Staircase,/The Viking,/ The Razor,/ Mr Despair,/Mount Blowhard,/ Growlers Creek,/ Dungey Track,/ Mt Freezeout,/Mount Mistake,/ Tear-Arse,/ Mt Misery,/Dry Hill,/ Horrible Gap/-How we loved the land!

> In Australia alone is to be found the Grotesque, the Weird, - the strange scribblings of Nature learning how to write. Some see no beauty in our trees without shade, our flowers without perfume, our birds who cannot fly, and our beasts who have not yet learned to walk on all fours. (XI)

In notes for a photograph of the *Buffalo Ranges*[43] painting by Nicholas Chevalier, Clarke writes foretellingly in the same vein as D.H. Lawrence did in his 1923 *Kangaroo*:

> In the Australian forests, no leaves fall. The savage wind shouts among the rock-clefts. From the melancholy gums, strips of white bark hang and rustle. The animal life which exists in the gloom of these frowning hills is either grotesque of ghostly… Flights of white cockatoo stream out shrieking like evil souls. The sun suddenly sinks, and the mopokes burst into horrible peals of human laughter. The natives aver that when night comes, from out of the bottomless depth of one of the huge lagoons the Bunyip rises, and in the form like a monstrous sea-calf, drags his loathsome length from out of the ooze. From some corner of the silent forest arises a dismal chant, and around a fire, dance natives, painted like skeletons. All is fear inspiring and gloomy. (Bernard Smith *Documents 138)*

Tim Bonyhady maintains melancholia pervades Australian landscape, stating it arises because of European fear of being subsumed by the country's vastness, and concern for survival (*Images in Opposition* 127). Such melancholy underlays an Australian literary nihilism which describes a pointlessness that has no redemptive attributes, such as freedom from a didactic God. For example, Xavier Herbert's final sentence in *Capricornia* encapsulates the nihilistic underpinning of much of Australian literature: "…the crows alighted in a gnarled dead coolabah near by and cried dismally, 'Kah! -Kah! -Kaaaaah!'" (510). Norman Shillingsworth, having just discovered the skeletised remains of his wife, Tocky and her baby, experiences an existential nihilism so intense that it is left to the crows to express the inarticulateness of despair.

However, existential nihilism, that is the proposition that there is no essential

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[43] Such was the outward gaze of the Victorian colony that Chevalier's painting was the first depicting an Australian subject added to the National Gallery of Victoria's collection.

meaning or purpose to existence, doesn't quite encapsulate the nuances of the nihilism evident in Henry Lawson's "The Union Buries its Dead", Barbara Baynton's "Squeaker's mate", or the ending of *Capricornia*, described above. Existential nihilism is a proposition which has been filtered by largely twentieth century commentary, most notably by Jean Paul Sartre in his essay on "Existentialism Is a Humanism" and Albert Camus, particularly his essay "The Myth of Sisyphus". Both works, albeit from different propositions, enmesh the original Hegesiasian[44] despair with threads of existential hope. Sartre in writing about the theistic implications of nihilism, there is no God, suggests that as meaningless beings we have precisely the foundations and the freedom by which we can make ourselves something and be solely responsible for that self-creation. Camus, in attempting to reject nihilism, proposes the absurdist argument that as there is no more meaning to death than there is to life, it is up to the individual to find happiness in the duality between struggling for meaning and knowing there is no meaning:

> This universe henceforth without a master seems to him neither sterile nor futile. Each atom of that stone, each mineral flake of that night-filled mountain, in itself forms a world. The struggle itself toward the heights is enough to fill a man's heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy. (n.pag.)

The ideas that both Sartre and Camus propose differ from Australian literary nihilism in that they are both ultimately redemptive. In Sartre's sense, individuals are empowered to be their own theistic agency. In Camus's sense, individuals become free to wonder, albeit in futility, at the universe unshackled from any theistic agency. However, Norm Shillingsworth's experience of nihilism is one in which there is no wonder, no god, no redemption and no hope. Norm in the end faces the realisation that there is absolutely

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[44] Cicero in the first volume of his *Tusculan Disputations* -Yonge (321) - says Hegesias claimed suicide as the only rational response to being, claiming he - Hegesias - had written a book called *A man who starves himself*

no imagined or real point to his existence.

The literary occupation of imbuing nihilism with redemption and hope has no real correlation in the nihilism[45] found in the Australian works mentioned above, and many more besides. These works are much more aligned to the "Greek gloom" which Tom Inglis Moore says permeates Australian literature. Moore goes on to propose:

> If such suffering and pity are universal, the sombreness in our literature has taken certain distinctive forms determined mainly by the ecological forces at work in the organism of the Australian people and its responses to its environment, physical and social alike. It seems to me that there are five such forms: the awareness of suffering …, personal melancholy, the loneliness of isolation, fatalism, and the ultimate void of nihilism. (9)

Nihilism confounds identity. If there is nothing there, then the lack of meaning and agency also extends to the observer. In a nihilist universe both observer and the observed are erased of meaning. Further erasing meaning was the way in which the landscape was named. Creek, lake, river and mountain were words used to describe geographical features which bore no relation to the word's original intent, even though a language should be "a fundamental characteristic of landscape" as it is in indigenous ontologies (Trigger 218). The act of "Romantic re-bestowal" may explain the strange phenomenon of colonial times, when Indigenous place names were replaced with English ones, and then replaced with recalled or imagined Indigenous-sounding names (Muecke *Textual Spaces* 6). As Bruce Pascoe notes:

> Colac, Elliminyt, Warrion, Beeac, Irrewarra, Birregurra, Geelong, Werribee, Burrumbeet, thousands of them; … there seems to be a compulsion to remember the original name even while trying to forget how the property came under white

[45] However, Richard Flanagan claims in "Freeing my Father" that "War illuminates love; love redeems war" (n.pag.).

> ownership. As if usurpation is not complete unless you steal the name as well. (*Convincing Ground* 73) [46]

The naming and renaming is not just "Romantic re-bestowal", it is a process of erasure. As Simon Ryan argues, the practice of representing unknown territory as a blank actively erases (and legitimizes the erasure of) existing geo-cultural morés, allowing the projection of a new order (116).

Conclusion: the colonial template

The issues concerning the perception of landscape in colonial literature contained three basic elements. First, the landscape was seen as contested. Not only was there ambivalence as to who owned the landscape, but ambivalence about what the landscape looked like. The idea that the landscape was unreliable indicated that it was often perceived as something that should not be, something that to the European mind, was unnatural. Second, the landscape became haunted by ghosts whose metaphysics evolved from the personal to the landscape itself. Third, the Australian landscape is situated as something adversarial, to be fought against. Fourth, the landscape became in itself sad, lamenting and grieving, or reflective of such emotional states in the observer.

Underpinning the above four elements was the colonial blurring of the idea of Indigeneity and Landscape. To many authors, the Indigineous and the landscape they inhabited were intermingled so that landscape itself was a metonym for Indigeneity. It would be expected that if the above concerns and responses regarding the colonial foundations of magic nihilism were still of concern to Flanagan and Wright, their writing, as part of the Australian continuum of magic nihilism would exhibit evidence of

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[46] Henry Reynolds recounts how James Dawson tried to erect a memorial to the "aborigines of this district" with funding from local pastoralists. One wrote back declining because "The obelisk will point for all time to come to our treatment of this unfortunate race – the possessors of the soil we took from them…" (*Why weren't we told?* 182-183).

the above characteristics. How Flanagan and Wright respond to those colonial concerns is examined in the next chapter.

4: Flanagan and Wright's response to colonial magic nihilism

Introduction

While both Flanagan and Wright respond to certain elements of the colonial issues raised in the previous chapter, they do so in quite different ways. The most apparent is Wright's stated intention to write as an Indigenous author. Alison Ravenscroft argues that the trap non-Indigenous readers can fall into in reading a work such as *Carpentaria* as magic realism, is that it negates a spirited world view that Wright once labelled as Aboriginal realism, but which is ultimately the representation of something unknowable by white readers (Ravenscroft "Dreaming of others" 211, Dart 7). Wright says that *Carpentaria's* so-called magic realism is merely a means of "looking for an authentic way of telling our own stories through fiction or any way that we want to do it" (Dart 7). In her Indigenous ontology, ghosts and spirits can, as will be demonstrated, be of the landscape itself. "*Carpentaria*," Ravenscroft writes, "effects its own resistances against the exclusive coupling of 'dream' and 'magic' with 'Aborigine'" (203). The claim is supported by Wright when she tells Kerry O'Brien that she intended *Carpentaria* to be a work that "contained our realities" (*7: 30 Report* June 21 2007 n.pag.). Those "realities" Ravenscroft argues, include "magical" elements of *Carpentaria*, such as elemental spirits and creation spirits. The narrator of *Carpentaria* raises the same point exactly:

> The Pricklebush mob saw huge, powerful, ancestral creation spirits occupying the land and sea moving through the town, even inside other folk's houses right across any piece of country. Nothing but no good was coming out of puerile dreams of stone walls, big locked gates, barred windows, barbed wire rolled around the top to lock out the menace of the black demon. (59)

Wright's narrator describes the clash between Black and White Dreaming: where the

two ontologies intersect, as is often the case in Australian literature, magic can be found. However, Wright's ghosts often imply nihilism and are sometimes of the Western mould. What this chapter shows is that as well as the project of proffering an Indigenous ontology, Wright often addresses some of the same colonial concerns as Flanagan does, albeit from an Indigenous view-point.

Contested landscape in *Carpentaria* and *Wanting*

Contested landscape, that is landscape whose ownership and affinity is in dispute, is a major element of the colonial template outlined in chapter three. The issues that indicate such contest, the sense of belonging of home, and the binarisms of landscape description are major themes in both Wright's *Carpentaria* and Flanagan's *Wanting*. *Carpentaria* largely concerns itself with the consequences of dispossession of the Indigenous by the white inhabitants of Desperance, and by a multinational mining company. The novel centres on the Phantom family: Normal, his wife Angel Day, and their son Will. Wright believes Will and Norm are the Desperance equivalents of Don Quixote and Sancho Panza of Cervantes' *Don Quixote*, arguing her project is a retelling of history. She also makes specific mention of Carlos Fuentes, "who learnt a great deal about heroes who ignore reality by chasing dreams in *Don Quixote*", argues that one way of seeing Latin American history, is through the use of history and myth, (Wright, "On Writing Carpentaria" 7-8). Wright, referring to Fuentes, tells Kerry O'Brien "All times are important… and no time has ever been resolved. And for Indigenous Australia that's the same, we have the same feeling and same understanding. It's about weaving history and myth into the present situation" (*7.30 Report* n.pag.).

Normal is a fisherman and taxidermist who stuffs all manner of fish with horsehair and then delicately paints them so they look like "priceless jewelled ornaments," (208). Angel Day is the matriarch of the local tip, a place that is also home

to most of the Pricklebush mob. She is described with some irony as in possession of riches. Indeed,

> "Her fortunes were growing out of hand. She now possessed dozens of Heinz baked bean tins and pickle bottles full of nails, loose screws and bolts. She became a genius in the new ideas of blackfella advancement. Bureaucratic people for the Aborigines department said she had 'Go.' She became a prime example of government policies at work and to prove it, they came and took pictures of her with a Pentax camera for a report." (16)

The white people live in a separate quarter, known as Uptown. Stan Bruiser, the mayor, is a piece of work, "a scarred face set like concrete, sweat running down from his hairy skull over his lumpy forehead and onto his exposed brown teeth," which he bares "like those of a savage dog" (332). Storms, cyclones, and floods predominate the living world, which is part of a much larger spirit world, some of which remains invisible even to the Indigenous. The Phantom household has been "inadvertently built on the top of the nest of a snake spirit" (13).

Normal Phantom is "encumbered" with the title "leader of the Aboriginal people" (37) and is "a supernatural master artist who created miracles" (205) with his piscine taxidermy. "The whole town thought Norm Phantom was mad" (201). However, they "claimed they had learned to live with his 'harmless' insanity" (201). Normal's wife, Angel, causes the great tip war after she finds a statue of the Virgin Mary and a clock among the rubbish. She believes the statue will give her the "luck of the white people" and the clock would allow her to tell her people the time (23). Normal and Angel's son Will is an activist opposed to the Gurffurit - a vernacular slurring of "Go For It" - mine, on the run from police for attempted sabotage. Normal has disowned Will after Will marries Hope, the granddaughter of Joseph Midnight, the head of the renegade Eastside mob. Will has "gone against the conventions of the family and their war" (202), not only by marrying outside his mob, but also by refusing to "cart the

ancestral, hard-faced warrior demons around on his back as easily as others in his family were prepared to do for land" (203). Will's activism is larger than his family's war and Aboriginal land rights: he was 'trying to save the world' (289).

Two other characters play an integral role in the narrative. Mozzie Fishman is a religious zealot who has an affair with Angel Day. Will spends his years away from home on the run "travelling on sacred journeys" with Mozzie (164). Mozzie rescues Will after he is kidnapped by employees of the mine, and orchestrates the explosion that destroys the Gurffurit mine. The second character is Elias Smith, a White prophet figure who appears one day out of the sea without a nationality, memory or identity and is given the name Smith by the town's White people. Elias is eventually run out of town by the White locals because they believe that as a "new Australian" (166) he is somehow responsible for a string of unexplained disasters in the town.

Elias later rescues Will's family from mining thugs before he is murdered by the same people in their attempt to frame Will for the crime as a means of getting rid of him. It is Elias's death that brings Will back to Desperance, which is washed away by a cyclone. Will finds himself in a state of limbo. He witnesses Hope being thrown out of a helicopter - "Hope falls with her silent dress blue into everything blue" (386) and then finds himself in a "new reality" cast adrift on an island of floating rubbish (491). The novel ends with the promise that "All dreams come true somehow" (515). Normal and his grandson walk hand in hand through a "watery land" that has been sung "afresh" (516).

Carpentaria establishes a number of binaries concerning landscape. Most obvious is the duality between the Indigenous and non-Indigenous views of land. Outsiders see "only open spaces and flat lands" while the Pricklebush Mob see "huge, powerful, ancestral spirits occupying the land" (59). Indeed, the land is alive with the "ancestral

serpent" "crawling on its heavy belly, all around the wet clay soils" (1). The creative and fecund potential of such a landscape is offset by garbage. The detritus of humanity and its description forms an important part of the narration in *Carpentaria*. The Pricklebush mob are literally at home in such an Anthropocene construct, they do not seek to alter the landscape, unlike the "heavy machinery churning and gouging the land" (150). Who owns the land is a major narrative point. Norm believes it his "natural-born right to pluck history at random from any era of the time immemorial of the black man's existence on his own land" (150). Angel Day spends her time hugging her statue and "telling people to get off her land" (26). "What about the traditional owner?" she screams (27). In contrast, Uptown people, who have consigned the Indigenous population to houses built from car wrecks and pieces of tin on the fringe of town, maintain "all people were born without lands and came to the new world of Desperance carrying no baggage" (61). The land is an "unguarded coastline of crocodile-infested mangrove mudflats" (84) a landscape Miss Sallyanne Smith, the town scribe, writes "everyone on earth longs for" (84).

The landscape in *Carpentaria* is strewn with rubbish, but is also one which has "song wafting off the watery land" (516). The binaries are colonial in origin, in that Wright makes it clear that they come about because "the Aboriginal was dumped here by the pastoralists" (4). Where the landscape becomes dreadful, for example when the "yellow hordes" are marching towards Desperance or the ghosts of refugees are invading Will Phantom's dreams, it becomes so because of non-Indigenous agency (3, 498). Elias Smith stirs up a "terrible deafening nightmare" of a "troubled sea" (43). He struggles to "save his identity" but his loss is "absolute" (44). The Phantoms on the other hand, nomenclaturally ghosts, ultimately triumph in the landscape, but not without cost. Will Phantom waits for salvation that never comes on a "floating island of

junk", a landscape very much of the coloniser (499). *Carpentaria* also dwells on the binary between the spiritual landscape and the economic landscape: the Gurffurit miners, dressed in black, wearing sunglasses and toting guns are represented as nothing but evil ciphers bent on a "crusade of killing" (394). Their "gigantic yellow mining equipment" is capable of scraping out "horrible devils" from the open-cut holes (99). Such "bad people" are even capable of stealing words from the "old people" (98-99). Wright's description of the conflict between spiritual and economic regard for the land is not just an Indigenous concern. Richard Flanagan tells Helen Davidson there is a schism in Australia between those who "want to see these beautiful places, these sacred places "and those who are "seeking to destroy them [those places] when there isn't even an economic base to it" (n.pag.).

Flanagan's *Wanting* also describes contested landscape, which is either of the Indigenous, the coloniser, or of the penal. A self-described "meditation on desire", Wanting interweaves three historically attuned narratives: one concerning the plight of the young Aboriginal girl Mathinna, the second Charles Dickens and his burgeoning relationship with Ellen Ternan and the third Sir John Franklin's governorship of Van Diemen's Land and subsequent death attempting to locate the north-west passage (256). The common thread of the narratives is Sir John and Lady Jane Franklin, who adopt Mathinna. The Franklins see her as one of the last of a dying race. "We removed her from the pernicious influence of the dying elements of her race, then introduced her to the most modern education an Englishwoman can receive," Lady Jane skites (121).

The benevolence towards Mathinna falters. Lady Jane cannot abide Mathinna's touch but Sir John Secretly begins "to crave such touch and warmth" (134). Mathinna "Our princess of the wilds", "the sweetest savage" (147) is eventually cast out as the Franklins prepare to return to England. Mathinna descends to a life of prostitution and

alcoholism, dying a few years later at the age of nineteen by drowning in a puddle (247). The brief and brutal arc of her life is nihilistically summed up by a witness to her dead body. "How it goes," he murmured, "and keeps on going" (252).

Interspersed with this narrative are major events concerning Sir John. By the time Mathinna dies Sir John too is dead, entombed in the Arctic. A decade later evidence emerges that the expeditioners had resorted to cannibalism in an attempt to stay alive. Lady Jane employs Charles Dickens to refute the allegations. While doing so, Dickens becomes fascinated with the story which he sees as a metaphor for his personal life: "he felt cold, and the cold was growing" (33). He produces and acts in *The Frozen Deep*, a play whose central tenet is that the "mark of wisdom and civilisation [is] the capacity to conquer desire" (*Wanting* 47). However, the preparations and subsequent performances of the play catalyse Dicken's relationship with Ellen Ternan. Despite the historically accurate allusions to the *The Frozen Deep*, Flanagan asserts that his novel "is not a history" and "nor should it be read as one" (255). He insists that the "stories of Mathinna and Dickens, with their odd but undeniable connection, suggested a meditation on desire – the cost of its denial, the centrality and force of its powers in human affairs. […] That, and not history," he adds, "is the true subject of *Wanting*" (256).

Throughout *Wanting* the landscape is seen as a strange and powerful element that is charged with both animus and melancholy. Dancing naked with Towterer. George Augustus Robinson feels "suspended between the stars and the mountains, the forests and the fire," a situation "both wicked and exhilarating" (60). The "sylvan forests and sublime beaches" nonetheless hold menace (56). Sir John believes Van Diemen's land "a weird land predating time, with its ... vile, huge forests" (172). Lady Jane believes "the stinking miasma of forests" to be antithetical to civilisation (129).

The landscape in this narrative is melancholic, in that it constantly reminds of an extinguished past. The few remaining Aboriginal survivors on Flinders Island gaze all day across the strait to their homeland "Their forest glades were filling with saplings, their tracks with scrub" (214). In her diary Mathinna writes "I cannot see my father's face I dream the trees know everything" (216). Mathinna walks down a "dark track" with her murderer "through the forest, where the setting moonlight was lost in the blackness of the great trees' canopy" (246). The binaries present a landscape possessed and dispossessed, nurturing, but now unkempt, a spiritual place "where all the old people go" but also a place where Towterer's "miserable people" are marched literally to Hell's Gates (120, 64). The landscape is also contested in that it is a place of not belonging. Mathinna is described as "half-hyena and fully a princess, queer, lost, belonging and not belonging" (251).

The other narrative strands, those of Sir John dying in the arctic, and Dickens' work to save Sir John's reputation, also describe landscape as a contested animate and melancholic entity. Dickens recognises himself "as ice floes, falling snow, as if he were an infinite frozen world waiting for an impossible redemption" (24). Flanagan uses the agency of ominous landscape to describe Dickens' increasing distress, which can be inferred by such passages as his train trip through an English landscape, quoted without attribution in *Wanting* from *Dombey and Son*:

> Away with a shriek and a roar and a rattle from the town they now fled, burrowing at first among the dwellings of men and making the streets hum, flashing out into meadows, mining in through the damp earth, booming on in darkness and heavy air, bursting out again into the sunny day so bright and wide. Fleeing through the hay, through the rock, through the woods, past objects almost in the grasp and ever flying from the traveller ... (Dickens 221, Flanagan 160-161)[47]

[47] Dickens' original continues in nihilist strain: "…like as in the track of the remorseless monster, Death!"

Sir John, welcoming death, "failing to find any recognisable landmark in that terrible white" (101) realises his downfall is in part because he "understood little of people generally" (102) and had left such matters to his wife. He now sees he was mistaken. Lady Jane believes Van Diemen's Land and her "own ambitions had become one" (102). The terrible white is also not a landscape of belonging. Sir John tries to summon "home's certainty out of an oceanic emptiness" (135). Lady Jane also finds no succour in the local landscape. She believes Van Diemen's Land to be "an island at the end of the world where trees shed bark instead of leaves, where birds bigger than humans roamed, and where they were charged with turning a cesspit into a perfumery" (124). The island is a place where she abandons "any hope of finding what she sought" (123). The land is "weird" "predating time" possessing "vulgar rainbow colours" "vile huge forests and bizarre animals" (172).

Unreliable landscape in *Wanting* and *Gould's Book of Fish*

From the point of view of Wright's narratives (*Grog War, Plains of Promise, Carpentaria, The Swan Book*), the nurturing landscape has been compromised by non-Indigenous agency. The compromise can affect the self. Wright's female characters Ivy, Oblivia and Dolly are all psychologically damaged. From the point of view of Flanagan's narratives in *River Guide, One Hand,* and *Wanting* the landscape is seen as darkly foreboding, also mirroring the state of mind of protagonists trying to situate themselves in it. In either view, the landscape becomes not only characterological, but an agent of a problematic self. To walk on it, as the elders in Alexis Wright's *Plains of Promise* do, is to walk on the "cutting edge of reality and beyond" (19). The landscapes Wright describes are at once Romantically informed and degraded. The Pricklebush community in *Carpentaria* live in a landscape full of car detritus, but underneath the settlement the Rainbow serpent resides, haunting the environment with metaphysical

agency. The landscape therefore has positive potential. Its characterological moral and metaphysical attributes are not all negative. Landscape in both *Wanting* and *Book of Fish* is often explicitly described as being the antithesis of the Pastoral ideal, and as such its ability to confirm Romantic notions of transcendence through nature becomes unreliable.

Flanagan says *Gould's Book of Fish* is in part inspired by William Gould's 1832 *Sketchbook Of Fishes*. The historical Gould was a porcelain painter who was sentenced to seven years in Van Diemen's Land in 1826 for stealing a coat. In 1829 Gould was further sentenced for forgery to three years at the Macquarie Harbour Penal Station, Sarah Island, a place Flanagan describes to Alan Yentob as the "most terrible and terrifying place of punishment" in the British Empire (n.pag.). Flanagan's narrator, William Buelow Gould, is intermingled with the historical character. Twelve of the *Sketchbook* plates are reproduced as chapter prefaces. The chapters are in turn named after them. In the Picador edition each chapter is printed in a different colour, representing the colours of the materials - blood, crushed stone, excrement - the fictional Gould uses as ink. *Book of Fish* begins with the narration of Sid Hammet, a dealer in fake antiques created from "old prices of rotting furniture" to sell to "fat old Americans" (4, 6). Hammet comes across a book of fish paintings in a Salamanca junk shop. It glows with "a mass of pulsing purple spots" and he is "washed far away by the stories that accompanied these fish (13, 14)". Hammet suspects the author "felt in colours" (15). Hammet retires to a pub to read the book but finds it "seemed never to really finish" as he would come upon a scrap of paper or annotation hitherto unknown each time he opens a page (24). After he returns from the toilet he finds the bar top cleared. Where his book was is now a "large brackish puddle" (25). He decides to rewrite the book from memory, but in so doing starts asking "Who am I?" (32). While

gazing at a weedy sea-dragon in a small aquarium Hammet becomes Gould (37).

Gould is imprisoned in a cell below the high tide mark on Sarah Island. It is at the this point the narrator's story world becomes elusive, sliding between times and places to the point where the notion of plot becomes problematic. Awaiting execution Gould narrates a story that includes his life as a poorhouse orphan, his relationship with a paedophile priest, his artistic apprenticeship as a Louisiana naturalist and artist with "Jean-Babeuf" Audubon, his familiarity with one George Keats, brother of John, his transportation and escape, adventure and re-arrest, his meeting with the gold-masked Commandant of Sarah Island, his liaison with TwoPenny Sal, the Commandant's Aboriginal mistress, and his encounters with "that miserable looking piece of pelican shit" (146) Jorgen Jorgensen, whose fictionalisation is less fantastic than the historical character. The fictional Jorgensen gets pummelled by falling books, "shrieking how nothing held, not even books" (295). Gould also relates his probationary period painting fish for the deranged surgeon Lempriere who hopes to use the paintings to secure his admission to the Royal Society.

The last pages are narrated by a present-day fish, a creature into which Gould has metamorphosed. He writes from the bottom of the sea, and keeps company with his piscatorial colleagues. "Our thoughts deepen & we understand each other with a complete profundity only those unburdened by speech and its complications could understand" (397). The fish offers insight into the national character: "... you'll never understand this country ... We've been trained to live a life of moral cowardice while all the time comforting ourselves that we are nature's rebels. But in truth we've never got upset & excited about anything; we're like the sheep we shot the Aborigines to make way for, docile until slaughter" (400). The fish continues: "Everything that's wrong about this country begins in my story: they've all been making the place up" (401). An

afterword, in the form of official colonial correspondence, reveals all the main characters described in the novel are aliases of William Buelow Gould.

The landscape in *Book of Fish* is explicitly unreliable. "…here Nature herself was to be feared – the harbor, we were told, full of sharks, the unknown wild lands beyond full of murderous savages" (106). The landscape inverts notions of Romantic succour, and confounds the Commandant's ability to read letters purportedly from his sister, Miss Anne:

> While bats blurred her observations on the invention of the electric telegraph, a mob of sulphur-crested cockatoos took roost above her inspiration of Wordsworth's latest rewriting of *The Prelude* (done in best Grasmere blue), & in the manured waste that gathered below a small rainforest began growing. In such a fecund catastrophe of decay everything became muddled & then one & all of it was covered in more & more stinking, encrusting lice & maggot-crawling crap. (193-194).

On the run and "wet through and miserable" Gould chances upon a huge peppermint gum struck by lightning (71). "There was no way of telling how big & Wonderful that tree ... was, now broken into a million splinters" (71-72). Even the weather is characterised as "Van Diemonian", capable of "brutal" "ferocity" that can make pine log walls creak and groan in "ongoing agony" (177).

The use of ghosts in *Carpentaria* and *Plains of Promise*

Carpentaria is set in country where "ghosts and legends live side by side", a country where spirits "never let you forget the past" (94, 26). The ghosts and spirits who inhabit *Carpentaria* fall into distinct types. There are ghosts that haunt because of wrong-doing, conforming to the Western idea of a ghost. There are ghosts that are of the landscape itself, and as such capable of being nurturing or malevolent. Further, there are ghosts and spirits that may or may not be of the living, for example, Will and Hope continue as living characters after their presumed deaths. People's spirits, as in

their vital force, have independent agency as well: two dead miners lie in a boat with their spirits "unable to move, as though locked in limbo" (421). The ghosts in *Carpentaria* are often concerned with the traumas of colonisation, but also with traditional Indigenous metaphysics concerning the living landscape. The ghosts of water people might "climb out of the mud and tell you the real story of what happened here" (11). Many spirits, such as the snake on top of whose nest the Phantoms construct their home are of the landscape: thus a spearwood forest becomes a "procession of spirits" (181), ghosts are the wind of a cyclone (471) and garbage dump spirits are magnanimous to Angel Day (16). Seagulls are ghosts (373), spirits are clouds (43), spirits plague the Gulf seas (93), wind and storms are held "in the arms of the saltwater spirits" (244). Even "shopping bags from the rubbish dump" rise up like ghosts (228).

Although frequent referral is made to the species of ghost or spirit that inhabits and is of some elemental component of the landscape, the most common species of ghost in *Carpentaria* is the Western haunting variety. Ghosts with an "Afghan smell" haunt the town (5). Truthful, frightened by a police station full of ghostly Aboriginal people recalls his "Italian mam's stories about the ghosts of dead people coming back to haunt you" (355). Fear of such haunting drives many actions. The old people say it's better to let a groper live than suffer its ghost who "will live in the dreams of the fisherman who killed him" (248). Will is told he can't leave the dead miners in a boat because "they will come rowing over any sea and throw evil at you until they kill you" (422).

The dystopia of Wright's first novel, her 1997 *Plains of Promise,* a world so bleak that suicide, self-immolation, torture and rape are all described, has been brought about by a violence that has separated the Indigenous from the landscape. The narrator makes the point clear by stating

> No-one was able to look after the land any more, not all of the time, the way they used to in the olden days. Life was so different now that the white man had taken the lot. It was like a war, an undeclared war. A war with no name. (74).

Plains of Promise is the story of intergenerational loss, especially by a mother and daughter who never meet. The novel starts in the 1950s with Ivy Koopundi incarcerated at the St Dominic's mission in the Northern Territory, "A place of death" (36). She is part of a dormitory where the girls are on "the brink of two beliefs" (4). She has been separated from her mother only days before, as her mother has been officially deemed as "bad" (130. The missionary Errol Jipp, separates the mother and child, interning Ivy in the dormitory where she is made to suffer savagely institutional deprivations and rape. Her own daughter, Mary, is born during a dry storm so severe the earth shakes "like a captured animal" (145). The baby is Jipp's, but he silences Ivy with a "fist in her mouth" (150). The child is taken from her. Years later, Mary realises that she has been adopted. "Somehow all traces of her past had been removed" (209). Mary returns to the Northern Territory with her own daughter, in the hope of finding out who she really is. But "The memories were too sad, too bad" (282).

Ravenscroft points out that *Plains of Promise* has moments of surrealism structured in such a way that the reader is asked to choose between competing ontologies ("What Falls From View"). Errol Jipp, she argues cannot see that Ivy is tortured by "small and faceless creatures" who come in the night "down the ropes from the stormy skies" (*Plains of Promise* 14), Nor does Jipp see a black bird that persists in its pecking as she crawls into a shack "which offers entrapment or no escape" (14). Ravenscroft asks are these instances of a woman's private madness, the result perhaps of an illness? The text invites the reader to think not: Maudie, for example, hears the black bird flapping its wings as it escapes the old woman's efforts to strike it. Maudie knows from these signs that the woman will die soon but Jipp trusts neither her vision

nor her knowledge. Maudie's Indigenous ontology is too different from Jipp's for him and potentially all White readers to even see it exists. The ontological confrontation is something Ravenscroft argues the reader is presented with "many times" (73).

The argument that this is an ontology that can only be presented in its unknowability to a non-Indigenous audience is compelling, but then if it is, it is an ontology that has mutated from its original Indigenous origins, because it is steeped in nihilism of the bleakest kind. *Plains of Promise* ends with Elliot telling a story "which he swore was true" (302) concerning waterbirds, the custodians of a "Great Lake" (303) and the inheritance of knowledge and loss. "Over time, however, the waterbird's children's children's child went mad, because she had lost her daughter in a terrible place … The great lake dried up and is no more" (304).

The only ghosts in *Plains of Promise* are the living. Ivy for example is believed to be a ghost because of her "Long white hair like a goat's down to the ground", "White skin, like she got no blood" (200-201). Such ghosts are a different proposition to *spirits*, whose presence not only permeates the entire landscape, but are often of the landscape and are almost universally malevolent. These are not the life-affirming spirits of *Carpentaria*, but much more sinister beings who are continually equated with landscape, death and malice. The reason for this is made clear when Ivy's arranged-marriage husband Elliot crosses country that has been altered by the "white man" with "foreign burrs and stinging nettles" (75). Nonetheless it is a country whose "essence" has not been changed (75). Elliot recalls a former time "when the spirits and the black people would have spoken to each other. But the blackman's enforced absence from his traditional land had inspired fear of it" (75). That fear alters the "relationship with spirits" (75). What had once created man and "connected him to the earth" is now something else (75). The colonising act has ruptured the connection between man, earth

and spirit so that in the altered relationship spirits are malignant and thanatophillic beings. Ivy's mother waits for spirits "to come and get her" (8). Ivy feels herself being "pierced by spirit eyes" in which she sees "evil" (22). She believes that if she disappears people would just think "some spirit got her" (34). A young "woman of fourteen" dying in childbirth believes that a spirit "that looked like grey smoke" is drawing out the life of her and her baby (40). The "Great Spirit" is capable of striking Elliot down on its "Serpent's path of destruction" (44) and is also the wielder of lightning whose scars are on a giant eucalyptus that had "fallen into decay after death" (58). Powerful "essences" capable of smelling out the living, rise from the earth (72). "You needed to take extra precautions to remain safe" (72). Old men believe Elliot to be "in secret collusion with the spirit world" (77). In this spirit world, the dead return as mosquitoes (81). Spirits wait for "one false move" from Elliot so they can "drag him off to a destiny of their own making" (82). "Malevolent" spirits are capable of controlling savage dogs (85). A fog is capable of carrying off the spirits of two old people (95). The very act of digging the earth summons spirits who carry off Pilot's soul (140). Pilot is neither redeemed nor resurrected, instead he becomes part of a wind that simultaneously haunts and is elemental of the landscape:

> The earth was piled high beside the grave, as the shovelling into the grave began, dozens of spirits ascended from the hole through the falling dirt, and without a sound carried out the soul of Pilot. Noah was that close he felt the breeze from the upward spiralling of black spirits, some still in mission dress, some without clothes, some clothed in grass or paperbark. (140)

That Pilot's "incandescent spirit" is carried off by "black spirits" representing in their dress a continuum of history from mission life to pre-colonisation can be read as a Romantic gesture, but one whose redemptive agency is tested by its political agency. The implication is that such souls are not redeemed by Delainy's living God (139). "Draw no simple conclusions my friend." Pilot tells Noah. "All are implicated" (140).

Moreover, a clear link is made between "the unconscious mind" and spirits seeking harm (134). Buddy is visited by devils in the night. "It's a war of the mind" he says. "The mind must be in harmony with the land" (212).

Adversarial landscape in *The Sound Of One Hand Clapping* and *Death Of A River Guide*

Many of the protagonists in both Flanagan's and Wright's works deal with a landscape that has metaphysical presence capable of defining being. For example, in *Narrow Road* Jimmy Bigelow experiences a transcendental landscape only accessible because of his inability to recollect his war time experiences (452). However, the landscapes in *One Hand Clapping* and *River Guide* are not benign. They are very much an animate force and one that is often aligned with malevolence, in itself capable of destroying lives and consuming souls.

One Hand Clapping begins in the 1950s when Maria Buloh, a Slovenian refugee, quietly leaves her husband, daughter and their crude hut in a dismal construction camp at remote Butlers Gorge, never to return. She is "held within the power ... of a terrible spell" she cannot break (380). Maria walks off in the snow for an unspecified destination. As she leaves, her three-year-old daughter, Sonja, wakes up and calls for her mother. Told through eighty-six short chapters the non-linear narrative shifts between events in the 1950s and the thirty-eight-year-old Sonja's pregnancy in 1990. Sonja and her family have arrived in Tasmania in the hope of a better life. Like other refugees from Eastern Europe, her father Bojan Buloh can only "do the wog work of dam-building" (5). Buloh cannot adequately care for his daughter, so she is fostered out to homes where she is ignored, reprimanded, and sexually abused. Sonja's hope is to be reunited with her father.

Buloh is an emotionally crippled man castigated for his foreignness "I am shit. I

am the wog", who breaks his back at work and his spirit at night at the local bar (278). Shortly after his wife's disappearance, Buloh and a crew are being transported to a work site when their truck halts in the woods and they view Maria's lifeless body hanging in a tree. Once again the memory is penetrating in its grim particularities:

> [They gazed] past the battered burgundy shoes to the small, delicate icicles already growing from the coat's frayed ends, and higher, higher yet, up that snow-rimmed scarlet coat and though now giddy with horror still their gaze continued to rise; from the ice-stiffened old grey hemp rope that collared her garrotted neck like a snake-coil of steel; to the white face above it, with lolling tongue and milky, dead eyes (260)

Frequently, in fits of rage and self-disgust, he lashes out at Sonja, beating her so that "the welts rose on her flesh and the blood dripping from her nose sprayed on the walls" (13). The beatings result in her loss of the sense of smell (242), a significant deprivation as smell allows "magic to conjure her soul away from her troubles" (16). Sonja's experiences emotionally deaden her, and she departs at sixteen, drifting through a succession of jobs in Sydney and from one loveless encounter to another. After learning of her pregnancy, Sonja returns to Tasmania to seek reconciliation with her father, but once again she encounters anger and disapproval. After an acrimonious quarrel, Sonja visits a friend of her mother who persuades her to stay in Tasmania. Eventually Sonja quits her job and finds a dismal house to rent. Buloh gradually undergoes a change of heart and achieves a rapprochement with his daughter after she gives birth to a girl.

One Hand Clapping has many nihilist undercurrents. The novel concentrates on the legacy of despair and hopelessness trauma can bring to a family. Both Buloh and his wife are emotionally scarred, having witnessed and experienced war atrocities during the invasion of Slovenia. Maria was raped at twelve. She was forced to watch her father's murder, and she keeps a memento, a photograph of him lying in his coffin. Maria is however a thinly developed character: Flanagan concentrates on father and daughter to

describe the full potency of the traumas that have been endured. Buloh is haunted by a thought: he remembers the Slovenian partisans captured and executed by the Nazis, with the exception of one who is forced to dig a mass grave. When the digging goes slowly in the rocky soil, the Nazis made the partisan squat in his shallow hole and they filled the hole back in, leaving only the partisan's head exposed (109). The result is a life lived hard with a determination not to be touched emotionally. Late in the novel Buloh looks back on his past and views it as a "nightmarish hallucination" (368). "Life had revealed itself to Bojan Buloh as the triumph of evil," (408).

The landscape throughout *One Hand Clapping* is treated ominously. It is speculated that Maria has effected her disappearance by simply being "blown out of the town on furious blizzard winds" upon which she "rises like an angel into the forest beyond", into "the wild lands." (2). The forest itself is "dark" (3). The rainforest makes "desolate" harsh noises and birds utter "strange" cries (34). Buloh's soul "fled his body and followed his wife into the forest" (64). Sonja drives through sheep country in which stand "occasional ancient gum trees ... brooding survivors of some terrible massacre" (22). Maria's ghost is "sucked back into the forest that was flying away from Sonja into the clear night" (372). Rain pours with "taunting fury" (113). It scratches the doorway (110), and as Sonja drives with father back to Hobart, the rain becomes "heavier and heavier" (94). The catastrophic fire of 1967 is described as "monstrous" "invincible" "terrible" in a way that leaves Sonja "terrified and excited" (321). The fire sucks "half the island into its transforming heart" and transforms the sun into a "huge ball of boiling blood" (322). The weather generally is "wild and mad" (173). The narrator also depicts landscape in positive, non-adversarial terms. Sonja dreams a "beautiful dream" of a "magical land" (153). Salamanca is "beautiful" (74), and "clouds empty their water" upon the "beautiful" earth (34). In all instances, however, that beauty is qualified by

adjectives such as “strange” and “weird”.

Death of A River Guide also treats landscape as a malevolent and animate force. Aljaz Cosini, an out-of-condition and out-of-practice river guide, is trapped under a waterfall in The Cauldron on Tasmania’s Franklin River. As he drowns his life flashes before his eyes. He has been “granted visions” but the hallucinations are not limited to the personal as the lives of his ancestors also appear (9). The non-linear narration explores Aljaz’s past through his eyes, but also from the point of view of various characters in his extended family. Aljaz has only taken the job of river guide as a favour to a friend. His father has recently died, and his relationship with Couta Ho, whose father is as “Chinese as a Chiko Roll”, has all but ended (101). Their daughter Jemma’s death acts as a separating force between them. Couta tells Aljaz “I thought maybe one day we could belong” (111). As Aljaz dies, he narrates four stories. The first is his own, beginning with his birth in Italy to a mercurial mother Sonja and a largely absent father Harry. The second is his recent relationship with Couta Ho, from another generation of immigrants, and the loss of their child, Jemma. The third is the history of his extended family, particularly that of his ancestor Ned Quade. The fourth is in the present and describes the river rafting expedition and his imminent death. With impending death come visions, and it is through those visions that the first two story lines are told in non-lineal fashion.

The visions include Aljaz's birth, his youth and his relationship with Couta, the histories of his parents, who met in Trieste during the Second World War. Aljaz sees Harry as a boy, discovering his own father's crushed body beneath the limb of a tree, his face arms and hands partially eaten by Tasmanian devils. Harry buries the older man under a stringybark tree, which, moments later, bursts into "massive lemon-coloured blossom" (74). Aljaz’s visions enable him to “see not the surface reality but what really

took place, stripped of all its confusing superficial detail" (79). Aljaz sees his pipe-smoking great-grandmother Black Perl fleeing what she believes to be an evil spirit. He sees his grandfather, Ned Quade, a convict, escaping from prison and lost, murdering and eating his companion. Quade is sustained by his vision of a "New Jerusalem" an ironically mythical place where convicts walk free (136). Aljaz also witnesses the 1828 rape of Black Pearl, who sings a "strange and forlorn song" that sounds "the emptiness" (315). Aljaz realizes he has witnessed the "genesis of all that I am" (316).

Aljaz's extended family include his mystical Aunt Ellie who "had the powers of the old people" (207). Surreal events permeate the novel, examples being Eileen's funeral at which the crucified Christ and cathedral walls appear to bleed (59-60) and the spectacle of a bedspread permanently stained by a woman's tears (13). Aljaz himself transforms into a sea eagle "a circle growing ever outwards," in the novel's last sentence (326). Aljaz describes the beauty and cruelty of the river he is presently drowning in. Aljaz and his fellow guide, Cockroach, privately scorn the "punters" who come to experience the Franklin as a holiday that promises "titillating apprehension" (27, 294). The realisation that "The river is dangerous. The river kills" forces the punters to confront a new reality (295). The river roars, breaks and crashes (14). It is a "river of tears" (79). It brings about "the most terrible blackness", chews, consumes and terrifies the paddlers (81). Aljaz hears "the terrible soul history of his country, and he is frightened. (152)". Ned Quade grows so dispirited in the rainforest "that when he passed out of it, back into the higher country, he stopped next to a King Billy pine tree in which he prepared to hang himself by his leather belt" (237). Werowa, "the old people's name for the devil" (203) announcing a death, has a "rainforest breath" (314). The punters have a "growing unease with this weird alien environment" (20). The Franklin river is beautiful, but it is also strange (252). The entirety of Tasmania is a

"grotesque Gothic horrorland" (132). The land itself is "strange" (176), "vast" and "wild" (188), and a "sad" "spirit" "soaked in blood" (203). Aljaz feels "feels distant, sad, cold, separate, like a moss-etched rock" (299). Souls remain "forever shackled to the strange mountainous island of horrors at the end of the world" (260). The island is full of "weird agonies" (261). The wind is a "violent song" (207), and the punters seek to avoid the "wrath" and "terrible violence" of the river" (297). The river is a "huge army on the march", an "extraordinary physical presence that cannot be denied" (296).

Melancholy and nihilism in *Wanting* and *The Swan Book*

Both Flanagan and Wright describe landscapes full of the same "weird melancholy" Marcus Clarke described in 1876. The inheritance is clear. Richard Flanagan's melancholic landscape in *The Sound Of One Hand Clapping* has more than passing similarity to Clarke's "Preface":

> ... occasional ancient gum trees stood as if brooding survivors of some terrible massacre, sharing their melancholia only with the rainbow-coloured rosella parrots that briefly called in upon the trees before flitting off elsewhere, as though unable to bear the tales told them by those aching branches. (20)

Wright, like Flanagan, also explicitly equates elements of landscape with terrible history, The *Swan Book* has many ghost trees. Oblivia traces "the movements of the ghost language to write about the dead trees scattered through the swamp" (8). Her personal history, including that of her country, where "a terrible thing had happened" (93) is missing from Big Red's wooden recreation of the world, even though the house itself is haunted by the "ghosts of trees with branches swinging in the wind" (216). Wright's Oblivia is also a direct descendent of the child lost in the bush. Seeking refuge within a gum tree, she is considered lost by the Swamp people, who "told stories to occupy themselves" while searching for her (85). "In the unearthing of those sad stories they found no lost child" (85).

The Swan Book describes a post-apocalyptic world brought about by climate change, but one which seems strangely to have little effect on Warren Finch and the ruling elite he has made his cohort. Oblivia knows as fact that "the swan had been banished from wherever it should be singing its stories and was searching for its soul in her" (15). Bella Donna believes a swan to be a "a guide that had reached out from the past" (29). A swan drowns for Warren Finch but "all the boy saw were pictures of Aboriginal spirits with halos of light" (114).

The narrative of *The Swan Book* centres on Oblivion Ethylene, a captive of her own mind, infected by a virus that is a "nostalgia for foreign things" struggling to re-assert her being (3). She has learnt "how to escape the reality about this place" (4) and be more at home "with the cool air flowing on my face from a wild Whistling Swan's easy wings" than with the "vast ghostly terrains of indescribable beauty that have given me no joy" (5). Oblivia has been mute for years, since she was raped by petrol-sniffing youths, the trauma being such that she retreats "into the deep underground bowel of a giant eucalyptus tree" where, locked in sleep, she writes "stanzas in ancient symbols wherever she could touch" (7). Long after her family and community have given up looking for her, an old refugee from an ecological disaster, Bella Donna, finds her. Bella Donna is the only survivor of a group of tens of thousands of "boat people" (29) "the uncharted floating countries of condemned humanity', led by a white swan to the northern shores of Australia (34). Bella Donna and Oblivia live in a rusted ship hulk lying in the Swamp, which is at the centre of the Army-run Aboriginal detention camp that has seen better days. The camp has been ravaged by war and industry and ironically by the "Closing the Gap" Federal Government policy on Aboriginal welfare (49). The camp's elder, The Harbour Master, is unable to move the ever-growing mountain of sand on the edge of the swamp. He visits Bella Donna daily, waging with her a war of

words and stories. Oblivia stays silent, listening to their songs, saying in her mind all the words that she cannot say aloud.

Bella Donna tells a story of the swan that led the people of her land towards the sea, urging them forward (29-33). She plays a swan-bone flute, and sings her swan song. When the swans arrive at the swamp, they single out Oblivia, raising the suspicions of the community. The swans are beautiful, perhaps bringers of luck. The swamp is renamed 'Swan Lake' by the locals. The Harbour Master begins to be referred to as a spectre by the narrator. He becomes a "ghost-man" (64). When Bella Donna dies, Oblivia tries to take her place, but the swans have given up. When they are attacked by the swamp people's dogs, they refuse to save themselves and die "still sitting on the ground, heads tucked under their wings" (91). The swans are "waiting for death" (163).

Oblivia finds she has been promised as a bride to Warren Finch, soon to be the Prime Minister. Finch comes to the swamp to claim his bride. Oblivia has no choice but to follow Warren and his three genies, Dr Bones Doom, Dr Edgar Mail and Dr Snip Hart. The five and two ghosts, Bella Donna and the Harbour Master, leave the swamp and drive into a landscape the genies call home. Warren spends his days on his mobile phone. There are vague threats against his life. The genies are murdered, but continue the journey as ghosts. Oblivia and Warren arrive in the city, and are welcomed by a woman called Big Red who instructs Oblivia on how to dress and behave. Oblivia and Finch are married, but almost immediately Oblivia is consigned to a life of solitude in the People's Palace, as Finch does not see her again until he is also a ghost. Oblivia is joined in her apartment by the Harbour Master ghost, who brings with him the talking monkey ghost, Rigoletto. They watch as the swans fill the lanes beyond the palace, and Oblivia becomes obsessed with saving them and setting them free. It is finally the danger to the swans that gives her the impetus to leave her tower, possibly to murder

her husband about whom she is conflicted, and to join yet another refugee march, back north, back to emptiness, in search of safety for the swans. Oblivia leaves the palace, only to return when Warren Finch is assassinated. She is unsure whether she is to blame for his death. Oblivia and Warren's body are toured in a Fresh Food People refrigerated grocery truck. Oblivia leaves the funeral cortege, and returns to the Swan Country, where she too becomes an apparition, "screaming as the voice of this long broken place" (334).

Despite showing strong elements of the Aboriginal Realism described and nuanced by Ravenscroft, *The Swan Book* is also full of melancholy and nihilism ("What Falls From View", "Carpentaria and its critics"). The bleakness of the plot is characterised by dystopias within dystopias from which there is not even metaphysical escape. Further, the narrator makes it clear that what is being described throughout the novel is a "perpetual sadness and melancholy of the heart" (105). There is little hope of redemption in such a world. The swamp is ruled by a "little gang of brain-damaged, toxic-fume-sniffing addicted kids" (31). "Welcome to the dystopia of dysfunction" the chair of a community meeting proclaims (140). The "heart of the country" is "hell on earth" (165). At the novel's conclusion Oblivia is screaming impotently "like the sigh of a moth" (334).

The Swan Book's endism is based on ecological rather than racial concerns: Wright's lake mob are in no danger of dying out, but they live in a dysfunctional world. Swans wait "in the polluted waters of the bay, and in ponds in the ruined botanical gardens" (246). Indeed, Wright's prose, like Flanagan's, often describes a landscape being actively destroyed through fire, flood, deforestation and mining. Of all these landscape elements, only the sea offers the possibility of renewal. In *Carpentaria*, the sea is capable of engendering "the hardest rain ever imagined" capable of making "all time"

stop (44). At the conclusion of the novel, Norm and Bala walk hand in hand through a country refreshed and cleansed by the tidal surge (512). Norm explicitly states his connection to the sea when he states "We are the flesh and blood of the sea and we are what the sea brings to the land" (33). Similarly, Flanagan in *The Sound Of One Hand Clapping* describes the "…breaking waves, huge water-walls rising only to suddenly fall into frothy flatness…" (173) as the causative agent for an "immense aching" (174). Andrew Taylor wonders whether the littoral, because of its effacing and chaotic nature allows Australians to be most comfortable with their "small c" culture ("Littoral erosion" 288). If, as Taylor writes, the beach is an effacement of everything that is not the beach, then perhaps its allure lies in its promise of innocence and renewal. The littoral is practically a metonym for childhood in Australian literature.

Conclusion

What is clear from the above readings is that while the Romantic project has not been abandoned it has mutated to a particularly Australian, Gothic and nihilist view that counterpoints melancholic metaphysics against worldly description. Wright counterpoints a fecund landscape, that of the swamp, with a "vista of sameness" (*Swan Book* 173). The mere fact that a landscape can be described in such language points to an unfulfilled Romantic expectation. In one of the more nihilistic and comic scenes in the novel, Oblivia observes a landscape that is a

> …vista of sameness in every direction - and knew that this was why women went missing on journeys with their husbands. They were lost forever. This country would devour anyone walking in it that did not know it … *Isn't it a great country*, Warren said … (173)

The landscape itself becomes a displacement metonym for the Indigenous, allowing an "acceptable", if bleak, "narrative" of direct conflict between the non-Indigenous and the land itself (Curthoys "Expulsion"; Boer "Antarctica" 85).

Ann Curthoys argues an archetypal Australian literary theme is the non-Indigenous "quarrel with nature" which forms part of a mythopoetic force of failure and defeat ("Expulsion" 8). Bushfire, drought, flood, even the ability to survive, all show Nature in adversity. Yet it is a Nature that the non-Indigenous desire to incorporate into their own beings, just as the landscapes of their birth countries have been. Landscape in such circumstances has the nihilistic ability to rebuff alterity, an argument Brian Deyo applies to *Wanting*. "Ceaseless vegetation," "endless nameless mountains," and "mapless rivers" (172) become the "dark cloud of a growing melancholy" (170) enmeshing John Franklin in a despair that the landscape, "a weird land predating time" (172), is in itself engendering of his own sadness. The result for both Flanagan and Wright is Romanticised landscape that is at once evocative of strangeness in its surrealist aspects and nihilist in its intense capacity to induce melancholy and obliterate the self.

5: Magic and nihilism in the postcolonial landscape 1901-1972

Introduction

The postcolonial period in Australian literature is defined in this thesis having as a starting point Australian federation in January 1901. The first act of the new Parliament was the *Immigration Restriction Act 1901*, which was commonly referred to throughout the twentieth century as the White Australia Policy. The act was not repealed until the early 1970s, and very much captured a mood of the time. *The Bulletin* had the slogan "Australia for the White Man" on its masthead for most of the same period, from 1886 to 1961. Although the evident racist antipathy was largely directed at the Chinese, it nonetheless raised questions concerning what is was to be Australian, including how predominantly White Australia related to Indigenous peoples. Australian Aboriginals were not recognised in census data until the 1967 referendum, and were excluded from Federal legislative consideration until the same referendum. It was not until the election of the Whitlam Government in 1972 that "Whiteness" began to lose its potency as a defining measure of Australianness, and thus 1972[48] is for the purpose of this thesis designated as the end of the postcolonial era, although many of its concerns remain in the present era. Postcolonial Australian literature written between 1901 and 1972 featuring landscape often concerned itself with issues of identity and remythologising mythopoesis, and in so doing highlighted the discrepancies between a desired landscape of affirmation and a perceived landscape of desolation. White authors desired a nurturing intimacy with the landscape, a landscape that affirmed the self, and

[48] The Immigration restriction Act was largely dismantled by Harold Holt in 1966. The Whitlam government, elected in December 1972, introduced legislation mandating race to not be a part of immigration selection procedure in early 1973.

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Sidney Long The Spirit of the Plains 1897. Australian National Gallery. The 'spirit' is a fair-skinned nymph playing a flute. Image source: Wikimedia

sometimes described the landscape as such, albeit within a Romantic framework. For the most part however, landscape was portrayed negatively.

Stirrings of nationalism: mysticism, landscape and indigeneity

The proposition that non-Indigenous authors sought to remythologise the landscape in ways that would affirm the White self is supported by the volume of cultural expression in literature and art of the postcolonial period which not only ignored the Indigenous relationship with landscape, but actively sought to replace it. For example, a 1918 poem by Henry Mackenzie Green describes a world not only devoid of the Indigenous but one where any spiritual link to the land is mediated through goblins. In "The Bush Goblins" the landscape is a silent "barren plain" of "eucalyptine stillness" overlooked by an "empty heaven" (9,21,10). As night falls, the goblins celebrate the death of day with dance evocative of the white-ochre body decorations and didgeridoo music of a corrobboree. This was not a new conceit. The meshing of European myth with Australian landscape had a history going back some

decades previously. Sidney Long's 1897 painting *The Spirit of the Plains* which depicts brolgas dancing to the tune of a flute played by a nymph, a being also featured in Green's poem. Without direct reference to the Indigenous, the nationalism promulgated by "The Bush Goblins" is self–defeating. In exploring what Australianness was, writers increasingly had to turn to an imagined Indigeneity to explain their position, and in so doing often conferred a degree of inauthenticity on their work. The Indigenous experience was regarded as something of an anthropological curiosity, as it was an experience of peoples considered on the verge of extinction. The Indigenous also offered a means by which an identity could be forged by Europeans seeking connectedness with a land which offered few similarities to those they had left behind. Katherine Susannah Prichard's 1925 *Coonardoo* and Thomas Keneally's 1972 *Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith* used imagined Indigenous optics to help describe Australianness.

Appropriation had nationalist potential. The Jindyworobaks' poorly researched[49] regard for Indigeneity undermined the nationalist mythologies they were trying to create, as exemplified in the writings of Percy Stephensen, particularly his 1936 *The Foundations of Culture in Australia.* As J.J. Healy put it:

> The suffering of the Aborigines was important for a socialist Stephensen as an indictment of the status quo…His sanction of them was directly related to the ideological framework into which they had to fit. For him they had a use. (Healy 169)

Stephensen used the plight of the Indigenous to underscore his socialist concerns, but more importantly, to underscore his belief that White Australia was about to be bequeathed custodianship of Western civilization. Australia could rise to the challenge, if only it could set upon a national culture. *In Foundations of Culture* Stephensen argued

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[49] See Brian Elliott (xiv).

for an indigenous White culture referent to, but not dependent upon the "supressed" and "exterminated" Aboriginal culture (12). The Jindyworobaks' subsequent appropriative texts reflect an emotional response to what Healy calls "the debris of his country's past" and also demonstrate a confused response to landscape (172). Landscape should be a *locus amoenus,* a place not only pleasant, but idyllic in having the features of agrarian economic prosperity such as shading trees, fresh running water and good abundant pasture. However, postcolonial Australia was imbued with a history that potentially denied that possibility. As Healy contends, the landscape allows the present to be "porous" to the past, and porous therefore, to a history which needed to be explained to situate and mythologise one's own presence in the landscape (172). The remythologising of a demythologised landscape was a primary concern of Australian creative endeavour in the postcolonial period. Kenneth Clark writes in his introduction to Robert Hughes' 1961 *Recent Australian Painting*:

> … in Australian landscape painting, as in all great landscape painting, the scenery is not painted for its own sake, but as the background of a legend and a reflection of human values. (4)

If that history is bound, from a non-Indigenous perspective with an inauthentic Romanticised and European mythologised view of landscape then the whole project of landscape as a "background to … human values" (4) is doomed to failure. If the autochthonous creators of landscape become, as in Rex Ingamells' 1936 poem, "The Forgotten People" then it is little wonder that those who forget become "The Gangrened People", a poem published by Ingamells in 1941. In "The Gangrened People" Ingamells makes it clear where failure leads:

> We who are called Australians have no country;
> no country holds us native heart and soul;
> … Our standards are fictitious:
> we dwell in the limbo of harsh deception… (11)

Without what the Australian Indigenous call Country, that is the complexity of interaction between landscape, ecology, self and society the self has no "heart and soul" (Rose *Dingo* 222). Deborah Rose further makes the point that in an Indigenous ontology, *Country* is "culture, [and] it is all sentient, communicative, relational and inter-active" (Rose "Val Plumwood's" 100). In the example of the White Jindyworobaks, the confrontation between their ostensibly pro-Indigenous politics and regard for traditional culture on the one hand and their complete disregard for the veracity and context of the symbols they appropriated led them and others to proffer dichotomies which produced no synthesis. A.D. Hope initially called the Jindyworobaks the "boy scout school of poetry" (29)[50]. "The Forgotten People" is not a poem affirming of land, culture or people., according to Rose's definition.

The Jindyworobak poet Victor Kennedy suggests that without an environmental referent the Australian poet fails, "because ... he has gone to Nature, the source of all vigor, in a second hand way" ("Flaunted Banners" 8). Yet the way Kennedy proposes, appropriating an imagined Indigeneity, is also second-hand, an abstraction of direct experience and an antithesis to Indigenous descriptions of landscape discussed in Chapter Eight. Kennedy's attempt to "go to Nature" is bound to fail on several counts: the degraded wilderness we encounter is of our own making; the Indigenous culture largely obliterated, marginalised and forgotten, and European mythologies denuded, because of their transplantation, of environmental context.

The failed appropriation evidenced by the Jindyworobaks was capable of engendering melancholia, because, as Anne Enderwitz proposes, if what is appropriated

[50] Hope criticism was contained in his possibly first ever critical review, in *Southerly* of November 1941. He goes on to say "They have the same boyish enthusiasm for playing at being primitive, they lay the same stress on the moral value of bush craft and the open air, they promise to be pure Australian in word and thought and deed…" (29).

is done so to bolster the sense of self, the failure of that appropriation corrodes that same sense ("Conclusion" *Modernist Melancholia*). The Jindyworobaks' imagined Indigeneity is given voice through poetry, to mourn a "lost" culture and ultimately mourn a lost idea of self. Given the Jidyworobaks' influence on authors including Miles Franklin, Patrick White, Xavier Herbert and Randolph Stow it is not surprising that many texts of this period imagine Indigeneity and with it imagine melancholy (Roe 446, Schmidt n.pag.). Thomas Keneally's *Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith* explores many of these same issues. As a non-Indigenous appropriation of the Indigenous, suggested by the author as a means of lending authenticity to the work, *Jimmie Blacksmith* explores many of the notions of self and other.[51.] The ability to gain authenticity through appropriation was singularly one-sided. Alexis Wright makes the interesting point that Albert Namatjira, who learnt to copy Western conventions of landscape in his watercolours of central Australia, was seen as culturally degraded and inauthentic for doing so ("The politics of art" 126).

Unhomely territory

There is an historical continuum of theory, starting with Freud, and then through Jung to modern theorists such as David Tacey and David Abram, both of whose arguments are also informed by Merleau-Ponty, that our understanding of self is modulated and nourished through landscape, and that if there is disruption to that process the result can be conducive to nihilistic uncanniness. The term uncanny itself resonates with Sigmund Freud's essay on "Das Unheimliche" - *unheimlich* literally means the unhomely, the concealed or the secretly hidden - to describe the cognitive

[51] Keneally, in an interview with Robin Hughes says "... it was a well-meaning intention at the time but I wouldn't do it now ..." (n.pag.).

dissonance resulting from being simultaneously attracted to and repulsed by that which is regarded (3675). The locations and individuals upon whom we project our own repressed impulses become a most uncanny threat to us, and subsequently often become the causal agent behind the travails and tribulations that befall us. For the coloniser, Australia was unhomely territory.

Many postcolonial Australian writers in attempting to deal with a Romanticised mourning of the Indigenous dwell on their White perception of the haunting emptiness of the Australian landscape, suggesting a White fear that they are not part of the landscape. From their imagined Indigenous perspective, the landscape – the exterior world - not only forms one's being, as Merleau-Ponty would argue, but *is* one's being[52]. For example, as Ivor Indyk notes, Katherine Susannah Prichard's 1925 *Coonardoo* not only describes a young woman at ease in the landscape, she is the landscape *itself* ("Pastoral and Priority" n.pag.). The Indigenous removal from Country through forced and violent relocation - also profoundly removes a primary affirmation of self. Moreover, the emptied landscape in itself, on the above argument, inadvertently forms part of the Australian psyche, as if it too is perceived to be empty, barren and desolate. That a sense of identity is forged out of negativity becomes an important point, as the only way that the landscape can then be negotiated is through a remythologising process. The most accessible way that can be achieved is through an appropriation of Aboriginal spirituality or its approximation in the European imagination.

The desirability of appropriation of aspects of Aboriginal spirituality forms a central argument to post-Jungian David Tacey's *Edge Of The Sacred* where he suggests

[52] Even linguistically some Indigenous languages cosmologically group diverse nouns. An Aboriginal language of north-east Queensland, Dyirbal, for example, requires that all nouns be preceded by variants of one of four words which classify all objects in the universe. The point is explained in detail in George Lakoff's *Women Fire and Dangerous Things* (92).

the unresolved tension between colonisation, Indigeneity and landscape has brought about a "shadow" on the Australian psyche (84). Tacey believes Australian landscape remains sacred[53], and that indigenous spirituality within the land affects both the European and the Indigenous subconsciously. However, the European rejection of Indigenous myth and meaning creates the "shadow" between the European and the Australian landscape. In *Re-enchantment* Tacey argues that the shadow can only be overcome through post-Jungian, new age strategies: promulgating a rising awareness of a need for Aboriginal reconciliation, environmental integrity, responsibility to community and to youth culture. Non-Indigenous re-enchantment effects the collective subconscious contained within the landscape, and only through the re-enchantment strategy can the non-Indigenous in Australia hope to overcome alienation, allowing a more harmonious and integrated national psyche. Tacey's argument is deeply flawed, because it assumes the experience of being Indigenous inherently encompasses the concerns he lists. Environmental integrity, responsibility to community and to youth culture may or may not be Indigenous concerns, but they are concerns articulated by Tacey, not from an Indigenous authority. As Gelder and Jacobs state:

> ... much contemporary New Age environmentalism and Jungian spiritualism turns to Aboriginal religion as means of making modernity reconcilable with itself. Here, Aboriginal sacredness retains its other-worldly, residual features, but is also activated as something emergent, as integral to what we might (or should) 'become'. (*Uncanny Australia* 1)

As much as the Indigenous is the "other" so too is the landscape. From the European viewpoint, the description of landscape and Indigeneity is implicitly a description of White European yearning. Yearning for landscape is encapsulated by Andrew McCann's critical summation of Tacey's argument:

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[53] Alexis Wright also believes landscape to be sacred: "de notre pays Waanyi nous dissons qu'il est une eau fraîxge, une terre sacrée. (Croire en l'encroyable: 9),

> In Australia, landscape carries our experience of the sacred other. For two hundred years the majority of Australians have shielded themselves against the land, huddling together in European cities, pretending we are not in or part of Australia. But the landscape obtrudes, and often insinuates itself against our very will, as so much Australian writing testifies. The landscape in Australia is a mysteriously charged and magnificently alive archetypal presence ... The land is, or seems to be, the sacred which bursts in upon our lives ... ("The Literature Of Extinction" 6-7)

The sacred "other" parallels the concept of the Indigenous "other" (Mudrooroo "Other" *Us Mob* 6). Mudrooroo's point is complicated by the controversial circumstances by which he claimed authority to write as an Indigenous author,[54] but it remains valid. The landscape for the non-Indigenous should be sacred in Australia just as it was in England. The failure of the expectation leads to a dichotomy between "howling wilderness and "God's own country" (Boer "God's Purpose" 50, 54). Europeans in such circumstances often approach sacredness of landscape through an imaginative appropriation of an Indigenous optic. The imagining, for all its yearning, is still European, and is often permeated with a basic disregard for the Indigenous experience. Rex Ingamells writes in "Forgotten People" of idyllic Indigenous life:

> I see a well-timed spear glint in the sun,
> And the small rock-wallaby killed on the jump,
> Then hear the laughter, the white-teethed fun,
> Of Black folk feasting by that wattle clump… (11)

Ingamells is not describing how Aboriginal life used to be, but how he imagines, from a European optic, what a naturalised life might have, *should have,* been. The imagining has nothing to do with observation, but everything to do with trying to imagine oneself by

[54] The critical responses to Mudrooroo are complicated by the well known events of 1996. Maureen Clark writes that Mudrooroo's "appearance was a contributing factor to any personal complicity in what he claims was the textualisation of his identity" (*Mudrooroo: a likely story* "Abstract" Thesis version n.pag.). "The metatextual elements of the author's personal predicament bring into play tripartite issues of 'Australian-ness', 'Aboriginal-ness' as well as the 'intermingled' nature of his family heritage" ("Introduction" Thesis version n.pag.). Nonetheless Adam Shoemaker writes that "The 1996 denunciation of Mudrooroo was so powerful, so complete and so all encompassing that his creative persona literally disappeared from view" ("Waiting to be surprised" 2). In the same Mudrooroo commemorative 2011 issue of JASAL in which Shoemaker writes Frances Devlin-Glass and Tony Simoes da Silva argue Mudrooroo "has re-emerged as the one who engages, who returns to a difficult past and puts his case" (n.pag.).

imagining the "Other". The idealisation of the "Other" affords the potential to situate oneself on equal terms.

Andrew McCann also observes the European desire to reconcile with the landscape lies beyond White societal boundaries ("Literature of Extinction" 152). Moreover, the sacredness of the Australian landscape is something perceived by only a few authors. Australians are so unsure as to what even constitutes the sacred icons of Australian landscape that there is a Christmas carol[55] that in part celebrates the erosive event of a dust storm[56]. Geoffrey Bolton argues Australia's "socio-economic paradox", of being urban, but dependent on the export of raw materials, makes it hard to reach agreement "even on the major characteristics of the Australian environment…" (22).

Appropriation of the Indigenous to situate the White self in the landscape creates a situation Tom O'Regan argues where Australian Indigenous people find themselves "symbolically central" to a whole raft of ideas that are not necessarily of their own choosing, and irrelevant to more pressing matters such as cultural survival and activism (276). Non-Indigenous attempts to situate the Indigenous in the landscape necessitates that their own historical experiences of a penal-militaristic heterotopia – cause enough of a modern national melancholia in itself – act as a catalyst, creating an idea of Australian non-Indigenous identity bound up in the perpetuation of the repression of the Indigenous:

> ... their care for country is a routine part of an environmental argument against development. As first Australians they have pride of place in a decolonising

[55] "Christmas Day" by John Wheeler and G James in 1948 has as its opening lyrics "The north wind is tossing the leaves/The red dust is over the town."

[56] It is not meant to be inferred that dust-storms are a phenomenon brought about by European abuse of the landscape (through such practices as overstocking) but that they have been severely exacerbated by such practices. See, for example, G.H. McTainsh and W.C. Boughton (188-233).

> Australian nationalism. Their original dispossession has become the settler culture's original sin.
>
> Aboriginal survival and activism ensures that the settler culture has to reimagine itself not as a victim of 'imperial predation' and colonial and neo-colonial servitude, but as a perpetrator of oppression of indigenous peoples. (O'Regan 276)

The result is as Gelder and Jacobs argue "uncanny": appropriation of the indigenous becomes a tool by which modernity can (or at least attempt to) be reconciled with itself. The imagining of indigenous spirituality retains its "other worldly" features, but assumes a role of informing a notion of the emergent, of what (the non-Indigenous) "should become" (*Uncanny Australia* 1).

This leads to something of a crisis in discourse concerning national identity, as the implications of these modes of thought, especially when one considers the Romantic context in which they are being engendered. Andrew McCann believes:

> Australian literature is still fixated on Romantic relationships to land and the very conventional sense of nationality based on them. This leaves us with either settler-indigenes who have successfully displaced or subsumed an Aboriginal presence, or a nation of mourners whose well-meaning penchant for elegiac posturing looks suspiciously similar to the poetic rehearsal of doom-race theories in the nineteenth century. ("The Literature of Extinction" 52)

The complexities inherent in elegiac posturing are illustrated by the fantastical nature of much of the Australian narrative. Historical accounts of, for example, the mystery of Ludwig Leichhardt's disappearance, or Eliza Fraser's seven-week sojourn with the Ngulungbara were not only literally incredible in themselves, but their subsequent historical embellishment in terms of Indigeneity suggests more than sensationalism, as if the fantastic could only be resolved through an Indigenous imagining. Patrick White in his 1957 *Voss* and his 1976 *A Fringe of Le*aves, explores not only the bleak barrenness of European hubris in the face of the alien Australian landscape, but also the possibility of the European appropriating Indigeneity so that the European too can belong within the

Australian landscape. In this philosophy, the Indigenous are inseparable from Nature, and both are elegiacally remembered as part of a more innocent past. If any concession is made to the continued existence of the Indigenous, it is done so in terms of thanatophillic horror and pity.

From the 1860s on Social Darwinists saw the racial decimation occurring in the Australian colonies as evidence that humanity had evolved through the process of natural selection.[57] The native Australian race was being subsumed by the genetically more advanced European a view that pervaded popular literature of the 1940s and 1950s. In 1938 Daisy Bates wrote *The Passing of the Aborigines,* in which she studies the social structure of an "inarticulate[58]" race (27). A major component of this "passing" was not only physical death, but cultural and genetic death through assimilation. A.O. Neville's infamous series of photos supposedly proving the genetic annihilation of Aboriginality in his 1947 *Australia's Coloured Minority* predicates another assumption which makes the project of reconciliation of the European and Indigenous within a Romantic aesthetic impossible to achieve.

The realities of colonisation and its impact on the Indigenous create a need for narration to effectively witness an Indigenous history radically different from the European view of the same events. Ultimately it should also create a political understanding of the issues involved. Alexis Wright contends "We have a total colonial history of genocidal acts which spurs on our desperate need to write to give this country a memory" ("Politics of Writing" n.pag.). But if the context in which narratives are placed are a White, Romantic aesthetic, it is almost inevitable that the appropriations

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[57] The debate between Darwinians and Polygenists - who were eager to show that no hybridity would occur through the subsumed race's demise - would fuel much of the passion for collecting Aboriginal anatomical samples, especially heads, described with all its attending horror in Richard Flannagan's works.

[58] Bates writes "I realized that the Australian native was not so much deliberately secretive as inarticulate" (27).

discussed above occur, and almost inevitable that in their descriptions they also describe the tension of ontological interstices experienced by the Shark Bay fishermen described in Chapter Two.

Tension persists from the Indigenous perspective. In Wright's *Plains of Promise,* the entire epistemological framework becomes disorientating and confounding for a European reader (Ravenscroft "What falls from view"). Wright goes further in *Carpentaria*, satirizing Christian traditions with, for example, her depiction of Big Mozzie, the leader of the Holden and Ford Dreaming.[59] Big Mozzie dismisses Biblical stories because they occurred "in somebody else's desert" (142). He believes indoctrinating Christian beliefs, like grog "would never do, never on the big Dreaming track" (142).

Bain Attwood argues Indigeneity becomes a field of some intersubjectivity, constantly renewing itself through processes that include textual and visual imagination, interpretation, history and dialogue. The process itself is mediated by a landscape that because of its "otherness" represents not only Indigeneity but its ghostly absence.

The language of landscape

Landscapes not only speak, writes Michael Walsh, but they inform the language we use to converse. A living landscape can be a noisy one, and human conversations only a part of that aural ecosystem. David Abram puts the same idea succinctly when he writes:

> Language as a bodily phenomenon accrues to all expressive bodies, not just the human. Our own speaking, then, does not set us apart from the animate landscape

[59] Wright seems to draw on the same material depicted in the 2002 A.B.C. television series *Bush Mechanics,* directed by David Batty and Francis Jupurrula Kelly.

> but -whether or not we are aware of it - inscribes us more fully in its chattering, whispering, soundful depths. ("Language and Land" 124)

Several pages later Abram asserts that the act of storytelling lets a landscape - a place - speak itself "through the telling" (127). Yet the Australian landscape is often one of silence or of troubling dissonances. Europeans will it into silence, and yet desire sound. The plangent sound they hear engenders Gothic horror (Gelder and Jacobs "Australian Gothic" 4). In his "Preface" to the poems of Adam Lindsay Gordon, Marcus Clarke describes an Australian landscape filled by the "myriad tongues of the wilderness", where "flights of white cockatoos stream out, shrieking like evil souls" and "mopokes burst out into horrible peals of semi-human laughter" (x).

The Australian postcolonial landscape is also often silent, the antithesis of its role in Romantic landscape. One only has to recall Jean-Jacques Rousseau describing the lapping of waves on Île de St-Pierre taking him beyond thought; indeed, placing feeling above thought, to realise how important sound is to the Romantic imagination.[60] Yet European descriptions of the Australian landscape for the most part full of silences, or if there is sound it is the screams Marcus Clarke describes. Jane Belfrage writes that the "great Australian silence" "audible and epistemological," was an effect of colonisation (n.pag.). The myriad sounds of the bush were reduced to "silence" (n.pag.). She points to a history of non-Indigenous attempts to "ursurp" the soundscape from the Indigenous (n.pag.). Twentieth Century Australian authors seem to be acutely, wilfully imperceptive to the sounds landscape make, and the sounds made within it. When Joan Lindsay writes *Picnic at Hanging Rock* in 1967, the silence becomes so awful

[60] Rousseau writes: "There, the noise of the waves and the tossing of the water, captivating my senses and chasing all other disturbance from my soul, plunged it into a delightful reverie in which night would often surprise me without my having noticed it" (67).

that at a narrative climax Edith is literally screaming from within it[61] (36). Moreover, the repression of memory instigates silence, as Flanagan makes artfully clear some decades later in *The Sound Of One Hand Clapping*.

Edith's scream from within a silence in *Picnic at Hanging Rock* brings forth an important point. Paradoxically, a landscape of unacknowledged trauma also speaks through the crying wound, spreading trauma from the violated to the violator (Caruth, LaCapra). The sound of unacknowledged trauma, like Clarke's description of the screams of white cockatoos, can both harsh and mournful. This is in essence the "Cry of the Crow" that Tom Inglis Moore suggests re-occurs throughout Australian poetry and prose, "uttering its harsh, penetrating cry that rejoices in its meal of the drought slain dead, that comes as the triumphant voice of the land itself, evoking its loneliness and death" (21).

The speaking landscape not only implies sounds but language. In the Australian context, the very nomenclature used to describe geographical features becomes contested: "creek" no longer signifies a saltwater estuary, "river" and "lake" do not necessarily connote water. "There are no 'mountains'... only ridges on the floors of hell ... There are no forests; only mongrel scrubs" (Lawson "Some Popular Australian Mistakes" 24). Paul Carter writes that the paradox of words describing their lacunae is not driven through description, but expectation (*The Road to Botany Bay* 47). Mudrooroo argues Charles Darwin's reaction to the Australian bush as "scruffy and desolate" was brought about by an inability within the English language "to describe our hospitable environment" (*Us Mob*) 67). Language, specifically the English of the non-Indigenous, is no longer able to fulfil its role as a nomenclative device. Barron Field says as much

[61] Lindsay writes: "The awful silence closed in and Edith began, quite loudly now, to scream. If her terrified cries had been heard ... Hanging Rock might have been just another picnic. Nobody did hear them" (36).

when he writes that without "January there can be no May": that is, without an English understanding of Winter, there can be no English understanding of Spring in the Australian context (*Memoirs* 423).

The dead or living landscape

By the mid twentieth century the landscape was not only often silent but so dead and so absent as to be unable to be an agent for the mythologising of man. The "spatial history" generated by such a process undermines the metanarrative of going confidently forward: this in turn, as Paul Carter proposes, promotes a "form of immaterialism positivists might think nihilistic. After all, what can you do with a horizon?" (*The Road to Botany Bay* 294). Such a view is made clear by Mr. Pringle in Patrick White's *Voss*:

> There may, in fact, be a veritable paradise adorning the interior. Nobody can say. But I am inclined to believe, Mr Voss, that you will discover a few blackfellers, and a few flies, and something resembling the bottom of the sea. That is my humble opinion. (62)

Australian literature has many passages which implicitly correlate a character's concerns with elements and events in the landscape. In Australia the character's concerns are often deficiencies which are correlated with perceived deficiencies in the landscape. Without any redemptive qualities, the landscape engenders a poverty of spirit. The perceived paucity in the landscape's positive attributes implies a paucity in being. Henry Handel Richardson wrote in 1917 of gold diggers "reckoning without their host" a nature watching over them with a "malignant eye" as "revenge…for their loveless schemes" enacted by "the ancient barbaric country they had so lightly invaded" (*Australia Felix* 13). Randolph Stow, in his 1958 *To The Islands* explores a White imagining within a landscape owned by the Other. Stephen Heriot, the central character in the novel, begins to have something of a spiritual awaking when confronted by the

sheer enormity of the unexplored wilderness surrounding him. "'My soul," he whispered over the sea-surge, "my soul is a strange country"' (186). The nihilist connection between a bleak landscape and a bleak spirit is made clear earlier in the novel when Heriot says "I believe in nothing" (75). "Now I become nothing" he whispers (115). Harry Heseltine, in arguing Stow is part of a nihilistic literary tradition, notes "nothing" is the most commonly used word in *To The Islands*[62]. Heseltine thus draws a clear relationship between landscape, state of being and nihilism.

The landscape in many of the given examples is an inversion of the ideal bounteous, nurturing, even mothering land so desired by New World poets such as Walt Whitman and Henry Thoreau. John Ryan argues that works such as Thoreau's *Walden* have affected the works of Australian place writers, such as Edmund Banfield and Charles Barrett. Barrett's works exhibit a "fusion of multi-sensory experience, ethnographic inquiry, and bodily participation in the landscape through walking" (47). Yet this idea does not break through to Australian narrative fiction, except in rare cases. Instead of an agency by which the psyche can meld with Nature, the landscape becomes representative of the other, so much so that in Henry Handel Richardson's *The Fortunes of Richard Mahony*, her narrator's description of landscape exactly mirrors the increasing mental anguish and deterioration of the main character.

The exceptions to the above argument tend to overly romanticise what is often a contested and potentially hostile landscape. Although this has sometimes been done successfully by Xavier Herbert's *Capricornia* in the 1930s, Patrick White's 1955 *Tree of Man* and Ted Strehlow's 1969 *Journey to Horseshoe Bend* such attempts often read as lacking authenticity. As a potentially nurturing environment, the landscape is also one

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[62] "Nothing" appears 115 times.

that some writers see as providing the means by which mythologies can grow through literally providing cultural soil. In "Where to Point the Spears?" Wright asserts that it is in landscape "that the principles of culture are contained, maintained, renewed, replenished, and transferred through a constant process of retracing and recital of stories" (36). She goes on to assert the story teller is like a hunter-gather who keeps whole "the country of the mind" (36). It is a post-Jungian way of regarding the world.[63] Wright's ideal story teller is one who is able to employ a cartography based on Indigenous understandings.

The postcolonial landscape was also highly gendered. As the landscape moves towards the coast it becomes more feminine, but only from a male point of view, so that where forest and field replace desert they do so in a way which allows conquest and dominance. The historical imagery of the (potentially abundant) landscape as being of the supine female body is so prevalent as to be scarcely noticed. This gendering of landscape, argues Kate Murphy, results in a rural masculine legend which has had deep and lasting impact on historical narrative and on discussions concerning national identity (17). The point is important because of the inherent objectification of landscape it implies. If the landscape is rapaciously objectified, it once again loses any positive potential for the affirmation of the self. The resulting masculinised brutalism finds one of its most horrific expressions in Barbara Baynton's 1902 "The Chosen Vessel", one of the few stories by an Australian female author to describe the landscape of the continent's interior. The Australian Outback is a male concern, and to mediate against the gendered excesses of that approach results in Gothic prose.

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[63] See, for example, Harvey Birenbaum's *Myth and Mind* in which he asks: "What we imagine, how does it exist? Do we see what we imagine? What does the mind want with what cannot be true? What is the mind that it should imagine? We feel we know what we mean. What can we know by feeling? Where is the land of myth? In the mind, of course, but in what space? How is it there, what substance does it have? Why is it as it is because of what it is? If its nature is mind's nature, how is it mind-like? Is it the landscape of the mind?" (274)

Andrew Taylor in arguing for the disinheritance of Australian literature from Romanticism convincingly makes the point that nature in the Australian context "has remained secular" ("A Case of Romantic Disinheritance" 35). Taylor also points out that if nature in Australia is female "she is not pattern or plan, embodiment of ... divine order, but the other: the antagonist/protagonist" (35). What ability landscape had to affirm the self, for example, in a pre-European Indigenous context, is now (according to Taylor) "irretrievably lost" For the non-Indigenous "it was never ours in the first place" (35).

A masculinised landscape, that is, a landscape not only viewed through the male optic but in itself representative of masculinity, also undermines Romantic sensibilities, because it denies the possibility of a nurturing, female environment. Taylor writes there was a failure by Charles Harpur "to inscribe into the beginnings of Australia's poetic tradition his own antipodean version of Romanticism in which Nature is a sentient female power nurturing and cherishing humanity" (*Reading Australian Poetry* 30).

While Romanticism's appearance is more evident in Australian art and poetry than prose, it was nonetheless, despite any perceived absence, a way of viewing the world that was greatly desired. Why else would authors regard the world, when all else failed, in Romantic terms of "void" and "absence"? That desire, although not universally considered from a male optic is nonetheless ubiquitously evident as masculinised, so much so that femineity is often reviled. The process is also generative of an outward gaze. Henry Lawson implored Europeans to sit on the "rim":

> The people of our cities look at the bush proper through the green spectacles of bush bards and new-chum press-writers, and are content - wisely, if they knew it - to sit down all their lives on the rim of Australia.
>
> No one who has not been there can realise the awful desolation of Out Back. ("The Bush and the Ideal" 31)

History through landscape

There are sections within Australian society which actively downplay the conflict between the Indigenous non-Indigenous, arguing the recognition of violence blemishes an unremarkable history in which nothing much happened. (Pike, Kiem). The generation of a "false reality" through the denial of history, as John Pilger put it, compounds the disjunctures of Australia's initial colonisation, and confuses and obscures agreement on historical record ("Historical amnesia" n.pag.). The end-result is a confusion as to not only what informs the self (is it reality or false reality?), but how it is situated (am I the Master or the Other in this environment?).

There is a well-established body of opinion that posits the Australian landscape only became antithetical to Romantic concerns through the agency of European intervention and the removal of Indigenous presence (Kane 15, Gammage *Biggest Estate*). It is only with the near extermination of the Aborigines and the ensuing loss of their fire regimes, the introduction of exotic animals and plants such as rabbits and lantana that the landscape altered to the point that only mythologies concerned with expulsion or servitude were sustained (Rolls "New Planet", J.P. Matthews 15).

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Sidney Nolan Ned Kelly *1946. The face, the self, is either the landscape, or if not, obliterated by it. Photo: National Gallery of Australia*

Gammage argues persuasively that Aboriginal people managed landscape far more extensively and purposefully than has ever been realised (*Biggest Estate*). Only when war, disease and dispossession prevented Indigenous management did the landscape deny attempts

to put it within the European context. According to Gammage the awful impenetrable bush decried by many an author only came about because of European agency (316-317). In other words, it was the Europeans themselves that created the circumstances by which the bush was infused with horror and weirdness. Henry Lawson could write of "awful desolation" "dreadful monotony": "A country where human life can just exist" ("The Bush and the Ideal" 31). Lawson gets to the nub of the matter succinctly:

> If the back country were a desert we might love it, as the Arabs are alleged to love their desert, for the sake of the oases; if it were a region of noble ranges mighty forests, shining rivers, broad lakes, and grassy plains, we would love it for these things; as it is, we don't know how to take it, and prefer not to take it at all ... (31)

The removal of the Indigenous presence in the landscape not only degraded the landscape both physically and spiritually: it denied the possibility of European mythology ever being adequate to describe self and place. Moreover, it allowed the invention of new and brutal mythologies - which, along with the mythologies concerning class, bushrangers, convicts and authoritarianism, saw the landscape become so unforgiving it subsumed the soul. Flanagan writes that the ease with which the landscape conformed to Biblical "waste wilderness" meant it symbolised desolation and destruction (*A Terrible Beauty* 65). Sidney Nolan, a friend and influence on Patrick White, the author who wished to "melt into the landscape" paints an Australian myth of Ned Kelly riding with rifle and armour through a landscape of desolation (Marr 292). Through the visage of the helmet there is no face - just a continuation of the landscape, as if the self is either the landscape, or if not, obliterated by it.

The wilful elision of historical narrative from which the Indigenous were removed – Bruce Pascoe calls it "delusion" - did not ameliorate the recurrent, almost primal fear of the Indigenous as portrayed in Australian literature over most of the twentieth century, even alongside the common assumption that the Indigenous were

through assimilation, inter-marriage and disease a people facing extinction (*Convincing Ground* 196). *Capricornia*, *Voss*, *A Fringe of Leaves*, and *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith* are just some examples where the Indigenous are portrayed not only as being of another time, but as stereotypical of non-Indigenous fears. As Pascoe puts it, the Indigenous act as "background to what many see as their more…important…white selves" (211). The Indigenous, Pascoe writes, are in such works "mysterious" full of "menace and malevolence", even, in the case of *A Fringe of Leaves,* simian[64] (*Convincing Ground* 210-211). Paradoxically, the desire for the complete obliteration of the Indigenous presence from the landscape necessarily haunted the landscape with that presence. The landscape becomes a haunted background and experiential overlay to how the non-Indigenous see their White selves.

Laconic humour

Tom Inglis Moore notes Australian humour is generated by the "extremities" of the Australian landscape, "induced" in part by the "insistence upon facing the honest uncompromising truth of life, stripped of romantic or sentimental trappings" ("The Keynote of Irony" 175). Moore explains that drought, fire and flood all historically combined to lead to an uncertainty and unpredictability so that "native irony is ultimately one aspect of the Shadow of Drought" and that Australian ironic understatement is a product of the physical environment (175). Certainly, as much as there is a continuum in Australian literature of ontological oscillation there is also a continuum of bleak humour characterised by Moore as being "hard", "earthy", "understated", "cynical", "satirical" and ultimately, in its disrespect of authority, subversive (175). The intensity of these combined qualities, Moore argues, differentiates

[64] One of the natives taking the jewels off Mrs Roxburgh is described as a "monkey-woman" (*Fringe of Leaves* 244).

Australian humour from other nations (174). Moore cites, among others, Lawson, White, Tennant, Hope, and Furphy as writers whose works contain exemplary instances of the humorous continuum (175-176).

Such humour is overlaid by two other humour traditions. In "Aboriginal Humour: A Conversational Corroboree" Lilian Holt outlines the incredible mimicry and hopelessness evident in Aboriginal humour. She argues that humour is incorporated even in solemn or sad occasions such as funerals as a way of remembering. Holt says Aboriginal humour is also characterised by being quite laconic and dry. She specifically refers to a scene in the film *Backroads* directed by Peter Noyce in 1977, in which Jack stops to ask directions from an Indigenous man sitting by the road.

> "Hey Jackie, can I take this road to the pub?""
>
> "You might as well, you white bastard. You took everything else." (*Backroads* n.pag.)

Noyce, in writing the script, collaborated extensively with Gary Foley, a noted Indigenous writer and academic, who also acted in the film. Humour in such a situation as *Backroads* depicts is a means of coping with the trauma of colonisation. It becomes a way of alleviating the horror of dispossession, and as such a rational response to nihilist existence. Humour, argues Larissa Behrendt

> … is a powerful antidote to the trauma, harm and hurt that comes with racism. It is also not only a source of healing power for the victimised, but also a powerful way to educate the ignorant. ("Aboriginal Humour" n.pag.)

In similar vein, Fran de Groen in "Risus Sardonicus" argues a particular strand of humour grew out of Australian prisoner of war experiences in Japanese camps. This humour, she argues, has the purpose of providing relief in the face of on-going and ever present hopelessness. As wry and dry Aboriginal humour, it also incorporates extensive

nick-naming, including the nick-naming of the captors, as a mark of defiance in the face of the almost certainty of death. Again, this is a humour that alleviates nihilistic horror.

Conclusion: the postcolonial template

Many of the elements of the postcolonial writing concerning strangeness, landscape and hopelessness have their origins in a colonial literature which has magic nihilist characteristics. An ambivalence with regard to landscape seen as both nurturing and threatening and the description of ghosts who are of the landscape itself, feature prominently.

A Romantic regard for landscape, that is, the expectation that land offers transcendental potential, also carries over from the colonial era. That the landscape often doesn't fulfil that expectation is evidenced by the weird over layering of European mythologies and the ambivalence between a living and a dead landscape in Australian literature of the period. Landscape is potentiated with maliciousness, broodiness and emptiness, so much so that it becomes a characterful force in its own right.

There are other characteristics which stand out in this period. First, there was a concern for the retelling and reimagining of history in such a way that the psychological reliability of being of the main protagonists is undermined. Grant Watson's 1917 *The Mainland*, Richardson's 1917 to 1929 *Fortunes of Richard Mahony,* Prichard's 1929 *Coonardoo*, Herbert's 1938 *Capricornia*, White's 1957 *Voss*, Stow's 1958 *To The Islands*, Strehlow's 1969 *Journey to Horseshoe Bend* and Keneally's 1972 *The Chant of Jimmy Blacksmith* are just some examples of the literature of this era which prominently intertwine reimagined and retold history and landscape in ontological oscillation as part of their narratives.

Second, the era saw the rise of nationalist concerns: many of the above works

implicitly question what is meant by the term "Australian" and interrogate some of the words presumed to define that nationality at the time: White, pioneering and in possession of the land. Nationalist concerns were also expressed through imagined Indigeneity in an attempt to invigorate a White Aboriginality. The appropriation of a supposed Indigenous viewpoint persists in the modern era: Leon Carmen's 1994 *My Own Sweet Time*, the supposed autobiography of an Indigenous woman is just as inauthentic as the Jindyworobak's poetry, and Karen Barker accuses Flanagan, along with Brian Castro, Liam Davison and David Malouf of describing White aboriginal characters who manifest the "fears and anxieties" of reconciliation (Heiss "Blak" 142, Barker "White Aborigine" 107).

The third characteristic of this period was the rise of laconic humour. Henry Lawson and Steele Rudd (the nom de plume of Arthur Davis) not only epitomised the laconic humour that Australia became famous for with stories such as Lawson's "The Loaded Dog" but also described the total hopelessness, the extant nihilism, on which that humour is based. Rudd's *Dad and Dave* stories were considered quintessentially funny when they were published. But behind the mirth one has to wonder what is it, exactly, that is funny about a story of a failed selector coping with failed crops, loneliness, and back-breaking work in order to survive? Lawson and Rudd laid the foundations of a humour that is both laconic and nihilist, and which was eventually complicated by being used as a response to nihilist trauma, such as the Australian POW experiences during World War Two. That these postcolonial magic nihilist concerns still persist in works by Flanagan and Wright will be explored in the next chapter.

6: Flanagan and Wright's response to postcolonial magic nihilism

Introduction

Both Flanagan and Wright at once refer to and subvert the postcolonial concerns outlined in the previous chapter, but they do so in ludic ways that reference their separate cultural heritages. Flanagan is interested in the interplay between the colonial and postcolonial history of Tasmania, love as a redemptive response to nihilism, and the modernist ways those concerns may be expressed. Wright on the other hand is interested in giving Indigenous historical and political views a voice, particularly those of the Waanyi people of the Carpentaria Gulf. In so doing, both writers interrogate and often subvert the postcolonial concerns of nationalism and affinity with the landscape, often resorting to humour and heteroglossic text to erode a stated principle or belief. Though Flanagan and Wright are very different writers, it is interesting that they explore and subvert the same themes evident in earlier writers such as Herbert and White. That they do so in ways which also explore a magical and nihilistic interaction between protagonist and landscape is indicative of the continuum within which they write.

Flanagan and Wright's nationalism, mysticism and landscape

Marc Delrez argues that Flanagan is essentially a nationalist writer whose main focus in novels such as *One Hand Clapping*, *River Guide*, *Book of Fish* and *Wanting* is the description of "white Aborigine" narrative (119). Delrez further observes that Karen Barker believes such narratives are characterized by "white Aboriginal figures who become the focus of reconciliation's attendant fears and anxieties, and as such constitute a possible means for reconciliation with the Indigenous ("White Aborigine"

107). Delrez goes on to "redeem" Flanagan, arguing his work is more about the dialogism between indigenous and non-Indigenous which gives Flanagan's works a "bothness" which in interrogating "the mess of life" distances Flanagan's work from "any unifying nationalist teleology" (Delrez 128).

However, Barker has a point: Flanagan often insists on imagining Indigeneity and invariably does so through characters whose Indigenous heritage is only partially known such as Aljaz in *River Guide* or whose compromised position in White society leaves them half formed. For example, both Twopenny Sal in *Book of Fish* and Mathinna in *Wanting* have little or no agency in the world. Moreover, Flanagan's attempt to integrate migrant experience into a novel framed in historical circumstance in *One Hand Clapping* points to an author who is indeed concerned by the issues of what it is to be Australian. Barker suggests such a project of attempting to beget a form of White Aboriginality has dismal prospects of success because of the tendency of authors undertaking the project to invest in "environmental spiritualism", illustrated by the protagonists' "specialist knowledge of the properties of native flora and fauna, and by a heightened perception that gives [them] spiritual insight into the natural world" (Barker 109). The landscape in such a view offers shamanistic potentialities. Thus Aljaz who knows a *Nothofagus cunninghamii,* a form of Antarctic Beech when he sees one, is regarded as authoritative by his punters (*River Guide* 35). But he is not above fakery, telling Rickie that a tree is *Erica ragifola* (33). The Ericaceae are a heath, and have no species *ragifola*. Flanagan is at once re-inscribing history – Aljaz's visions of Tasmania's terrible past – and subverting it, often through the description of landscape or a constituent element of landscape, a process which is repeated throughout many of his novels. Landscapes in *Wanting* for example shimmer between "sublime" sylvan arcady (56) and soul-sucking wildness (181). Perhaps in failing to provide "any unifying

nationalist teleology" Flanagan is suggesting that Australianness is beyond nationalism (Delrez 128). He makes the point in "The Australian Disease" that we, the nation, will "inevitably arrive at despair" if we make a "fetish" of our national politics and those who practice it (81-82). In his 2016 Boisbouvier Lecture "Australia has lost its way" Flanagan argues that since the late 1960s there has been no such thing as Australian literature, but then asserts that writing "assert[s] freedom" and "find[s] meaning" in an Australia that has lost its moral compass, particularly in relation to immigrant detainees on Manus and Nauru. Citing Camus as a "Tasmanian" writer Flanagan argues the proposition of "history as destiny" and its "totalitarian" implications are countered by Camus' "idea of the natural world" (n.pag.) "In Camus' writings I found my experience of Tasmania's rivers and forests, its great coasts and beaches, made sense of" (n.pag.). Flanagan argues landscape incorporated into being is an antidote to the bleakness of historical inevitability. Jo Jones argues Flanagan's "postmodern anti-realist form" subverts historical positivism and in so doing he interrogates the stable tangibility of Australian history (115). That too creates landscapes that are mystically ambivalent, ones in which the outside observer experiences uncanny perception. Sonja in *One Hand Clapping* sees the earth as "beautiful" (34) and "magical" (153) but also as "dark" (3) "wild lands" (2).

Wright is equally conflicted in her equating nationalism and mystic landscape, but for different reasons to Flanagan. Australianness in *The Swan Book* is "three centuries of denial" only mitigated when climate change forces a situation where Australia is brought to its "illegal colonising knees" (104, 105). Wright's main focus is giving the Indigenous voice, even if that voice carries forever a "perpetual sadness and melancholy" (105). There is no touchstone of reconciliation that Barker accuses non-Indigenous writers who imagine an Indigenous self of desiring. Throughout Wright's

work there is an explication of an Indigenous historical point of view, and how that the Indigenous experience of colonisation engenders perpetual sadness.

Wright is interested in re-vitalising Indigenous culture. In conversation with Arnold Zable Wright states that *Carpentaria* includes Waanyi words to keep the language alive. Further, she is interested in detailing the traumatised postcolonial world of the Australian Indigenous. The very concept of Country imbues landscape with a transcendental potency, but that same landscape is one that has been inscribed with the trauma of colonisation. There is a confliction in her descriptions of landscape which are more often than not replete with "junk buried among the ancestral spirits" (*Swan Book* 11). In *Grog War* the narrator moves from a reverential and poetic description of the landscape at Tennant Creek to "dried-up puddles of blood sticking all over the dry stubble grass, broken beer glass and ground" (3, 203). "I see myself as… Waanyi… But I'm also Australian" Wright says in an interview with Stephen Moss, but she also sees mainstream Australia as ignorant and uncaring of what it means to be an Indigenous (n.pag.). Her landscapes have the Indigenous potency of Country compromised by the Coloniser. The Harbour Master rows in a swamp past "decaying plastic, unwanted clothes, rotting vegetable matter of slime that bobbed, *wanami* diesel slick" (*The Swan Book* 36). "Wanami" like many of the Waanyi words used, has uncertain meaning. Wright uses it just twice in the Swan Book, without explanation.[65] Wright undermines expectations of a narrative. Unlike Katherine Susannah Prichard, she includes no helpful dictionary in her novel (Prichard 233-234). Wright also subverts non-Indigenous knowledge systems. Oblivia, at once mute and traumatised, whose only education has been through Bella Donna, but who is nonetheless able to "recall" the work of "Ch'i

[65] The *Waanyi Wire* of November 2014 explains *wanami* to be "vocabularies around water" (5), yet the contexts within which Wright uses the word clearly imply, apart from fuel, the rainbow of colours a fuel slick displays. Wanami is not listed in a "Waanji resources" word list. That the word is similar to the northern desert regions *wanampi*, meaning rainbow serpent, adds to the uncertainty.

Chi", a name that may or may not refer to Xin Qiji, also known as Hsin Ch'i-chi (303). The line quoted – "*a lone boat chasing the moon*"- does not exist in any English translation of Xin Qiji's poetry, the reference is subverted (303). The aim appears to be to erode the reader's certitude and ontology.

Unhomely territory in *The Swan Book* and *Death Of A River Guide*

The ghosts in *The Swan Book* and *River Guide* have many different characteristics, but they do in general share two things: they are of the landscape itself, an unhomely territory, and are often personal ghosts, only sensed by a central living character.

The Swan Book describes a ghost landscape. Even the seasons are spirits (9). Ghosts not only inhabit the elements of landscape, they are in themselves those very elements. Thus there is a dust storm ghost (13), weather spirits who can "turn the skies black with themselves" (53), sand spirits capable of forming dunes (53), a tree spirit (100), landmarks that are "the possessions of spirit guardians" (190), "ghosts of trees" (216), and "old drought-buster spirit" (239), skies that are "haunted with the ghosts of swallows and pigeons" (271), ghost swans (272), a "ghost wind" (311) and a ghost drought woman (330). There is even a "ghost street" (262).

As well as being a "ghost place" (334), many of the central characters are themselves ghosts. A truckie's cab seats the truckie, Oblivia, the ghost Harbour Master, a ghost monkey and three ghost security guards, who argue and whinge and have such physical presence that their proximity leaves them "squashed" (297). Bella Donna and the Harbour Master, for much of the novel are ghosts, but ones that demand to be heard. Oblivia believes she can hear the ghosts of Bella Donna and the Harbour Master whispering over the swamp (120). There are ghost sailors (9), foreign ghosts (57) "dead men marching" (58), and hordes of refugee ghosts (311).

In *The Swan Book's* ghost universe actions and language are haunted. People gamble cards and play like ghosts (31). The swamp's inhabitants find themselves suddenly using bits of a ghost language, Latin, in their everyday conversation (80). Oblivia does the "ghost walk" in leaving the funeral cortege of a Fresh Food People truck. "She just walked around the smudged lines of the circles the giants had sketched in another of their hell maps" (300). The ghosts are for the most Indigenous, as Wright makes it explicit: the wandering refugees, reduced to poverty and misery, are "welcomed to a sort of limbo by an Aboriginal man called Half Life, sitting astride a camel" (313). A ghost land screams with "all its life. Welcome to our world" (327).

While Wright is clearly drawing a correlation between her ghost world and the perception of the Indigenous Australians by the non-Indigenous, Flanagan's ghosts in *River Guide* are different creatures. In Aljaz's visions Harry, who feels as if he is "his father's ghost" starts serving meals to dead relatives (75). The meals grow in number and volume. Harry builds a barbecue that is a "Baroque premonition of a Wurlitzer organ" (241) upon which he now cooks all sorts of dishes, so that "long-lost relatives come visiting, or friends of the phantom children" (217) as well as for two tables of animals including a goanna and some black cockatoos who are playing cards (239). Aljaz wonders "why *did* he cook all those tons of rissoles and fish over the years for ghosts?" (264). Harry's spirit sees other spirits. Floating above a dying Ned Quade, Harry is told by a ghost and a lobster to pay no heed "that's just the ghost of an old lag" (239). Aljaz's spirit roams. He flails out at Couta Ho and Maria Magdalena Svevo because he can see them, but they can't see him (176). Everyone is invisible, Aljaz muses, "because we are all phantoms who had lost something central and we roamed the earth like haunted spirits" (177). One spirit, the land, is "angry and sad" that it has been "soaked in blood" (203). The haunting infects Sarah Island where "from the throats and mouths

of the proud people of the Needwonne and Tarkine, come screams and weeping… They believe the building to be possessed of evil spirits" (149). The experience of such ghosts is suspect. Aljaz believes he has "been granted visions", "that the spirit of the sleeping and dying in the rainforest roam everywhere" (9). His spectral powers allow him to roam time and place, but his visions are visions of violence

> I saw … slaughtered whales, …saw swirling through their ranks colonies of slaughtered seals… Saw an Aboriginal village of beehive huts whose women had been stolen and who had returned with terrible stories and strange haunting songs". (323)

Even though Aljaz's ghosts share some of the physical agency of those in *The Swan Book*, they are for the most part historical and personal. They also behave more as western ghosts do, floating, appearing out of mist and spectrally vanishing.

The language of landscape

Cummins and Groth point to Alexis Wright being one of few writers who have reclaimed the "usurped sovereignty" that Whites have made on the sounds of Australian landscape (8). Wright imbues the landscape with whispers, roaring winds, thunderclaps, tinkling music, the song of birdlife, even the sound of mud cracking. Wright's short story "The Chinky Apple Tree" is a veritable soundscape, which ends with the droning of a multitude of grasshoppers literally granting ascension to an old woman. The reclamation of "usurped sovereignty" extends beyond the sounds of landscape to the language used to describe it. Wright is not just interested in the language of landscape, but the sounds of language, a technique with direct antecedents to Paddy Roe's 1983 *Gularabulu: Stories from the West Kimberley* (transcribed by Stephen Muecke). Muecke believes some words are untranslatable and further, quoting Derrida, argues written forms of language cannot assume ascendancy over spoken forms ("Introduction"). He does not however assume as some do, for example, Clunies Ross,

that Aboriginal people are thus in some pristine state untouched by writing, merely because their inscriptions are *anaphabéte,* without writing (Ross 17).

Wright lets her landscape speak, in part through attempting to recall a language and way of describing the world now largely forgotten. In her "Acknowledgements" at the end of *Carpentaria,* she explicitly thanks Aboriginal linguistics researcher Gavan Breen for his work with the Waanyi language: "a great resource for me to draw upon in bringing the words of our language into the novel" (517). Wright relies on Breen's expertise because local knowledge of the language is largely absent: the language has been described as "on the verge of extinction", spoken by 10 individuals, or less (Osborne 2, Trigger 220, Australian Indigenous Languages Database n.pag.). Nicholas Jose describes such linguistic loss as the "shards" of "a broken word-horde that is enough to suggest a complete word-world that existed once, not so long ago" (*sic* 86). That from these "shards" a complete world must be reconstructed is as much an exercise in imagination as it is in history.

An undermined cosmology leads to contending ontologies, the experience of which Patrick McConvell believes manifests in "code switching", essentially the ability to switch from one referential vocabulary to another (97). The description of that experience and the nihilism such experience engenders forms a central part of the narrative in many Indigenous works. Word-hoards inform ontology and if one ontology is false, then its competitor comes under suspicion. Kim Scott's 1999 *Benang* constantly references A.O. Neville's terms of classification, destabilising the precise and racist words he uses to genetically categorise people. Wright often engages in code switching, a technique "employed by the polydialectical writer … to make dialect more accessible" (Ashcroft 71). Ashcroft goes on to write that "…double glossing and code-switching … act as an interweaving interpretative mode" which includes untranslated words (71).

The result installs cultural distinctiveness in the writing (Ashcroft 71). Wright's use of code-switching (for example, the use of the word *humbug* an Aboriginal English term that has equivalences with the standard English verb *annoy*) in *Plains of Promise* (188). Such code-switching expressly adds authenticity to her work. Wright tells Maryam Azam "… what I try to do … is to write in the way we tell stories and in the voice of our own people and our own way of speaking" (n.pag.). The code-switching allows the narrator in *Carpentaria* to see only comic potential in the Desperance Whites' view of the world, and reduces a non-indigenous character such as Errol Jipp, to a monstrous cartoon parody of a rapacious white coloniser in *Plains of Promise*. The technique also presents contending ontologies that offer landscapes of spiritual significance for the Indigenous, and bereft of spiritual significance for the non-Indigenous.

Wright tries to re-appropriate language. One of her narrative devices is to include Waanyi phrases and words, often without translation, or with a meaning that can only be inferred through context. Paul Sharrad notes that Alexis Wright's language "slides about" resulting in what some might see as stylistic awkwardness ("Beyond Capricornia" 54). However, he posits that the intention is to show the reader a story, which a nation believes is known, is not known: "it is stranger than newspapers or history books or folk wisdom" (Sharrad 54). The metaphysical equivocation generated through the desire to contextualise the self with the landscape is arguably a Romantic project. Nonetheless, the tense shifts, jagged dialogue, insertion of Waanyi words, descriptive inflation alongside vernacular and formal English have the effect of subverting that Romanticism. The effect is what Sharrad describes as a "whispering undercurrent of *unheimlich* subaltern history" (54). Wright's magic nihilism through the

deliberate obfuscation of precise meaning indicates an underlying horror[66]. All her stories evoke misapprehension, destruction and death. The act of writing the word guarantees its remembrance but also points to the failure of Waanyi – a language whose inscriber admits not knowing well - to impart precise meaning, as very few of Wright's audience can speak it (*Carpentaria* 517). That in itself, the guarantee of inarticulateness, is a melancholic and therefore nihilistic conceit. "Melancholia then ends up in asymbolia, in loss of meaning" (Kristeva 42). Jennifer Rutherford writes that the melancholy engendered through "placelessness, speechlessness and absence of the Other" is "idiosyncratically Australian" (*Gauche Intruder* 149). Nihilist soundscapes – the sounds of moans, groans, shrieks and cries are a major element of the description of landscape in *Carpentaria*. Thunderclaps explode, a haunting "echo of the thunder rolling back to the sea" is heard (44), ears prickle (41), time itself becomes a "fleeting whisper" for Will (164). The wind is "a crackling feminine wail" (261). Old people hear the sound of "the great spiritual ancestors roaring out of the dusty, polluted seas" (401).

But unlike Flanagan's soundscapes, there is often optimism within *Carpentaria*. One of the few pleasant sounds the landscape makes is the sea-bed, where Elias "could have stayed…lost forever to the tranquil music of thousands of bits and pieces" of rubbish (61). The wind sings to Will "At home on the sea, at home on the land" (181). Winter winds blow south-easterly in weekly percussive rhythms (209).

One Hand Clapping also examines asymbolia, the loss of the ability to understand symbols such as words, and its reflection in nihilist sound. Memory itself becomes an "aching shriek" (50) only crowded out by "the low thrum of dull everyday certainties" (51). A gale rises and the wind begins to cry. "Aja, aja, it seemed to howl. Aja, aja" (8).

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[66] Indeed Wright's historical description of how the Waanyi were treated in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries makes fraught reading.

The Slovenian phatic *aja*, is a word without meaning, but evocative of despair or loss in any language because of its onomatopoeia. The loss of words is a central theme in the book. The loss of language breeds a situation where with her father Sonja knows almost no words:

> The word 'love'-the one word describing the essential but hidden nature of Sonja's story-had been cast from their minds and their tongues so long ago that neither noticed its peculiar absence. Word, mind you, word, not the notion itself". (292)

The landscape itself makes the sounds of mourning. "Strange bird cries" are described (33). Trees crack and groan, wires "whistle eerily" (8). Bojan remembers making love to Maria, her low moans rising up "as if from the earth itself" (310). However, it is silence, and screams within silence that predominate the aural world, drawing a direct link to a protagonist's angst. Digging into the earth at Butlers Gorge Sonja's fingers act as if they are "digging into a land within her own skull. As she dug so, Sonja did not scream" (34). Sonja giving birth is described as the "silence before the gale" (298). Even buildings cower in "shivering huddles before the force and weight and silence of the unknowable" (4). The narrator likens Sonja as a girl, waiting in a car outside a pub to an insect inside a bell jar. "The insect was screaming" (234). Surveying bushfire devastation, Sonja notes the view "always ended in the most silent and desolate blackness" (321). Silence is directly equated with nihilism.

Dead and living landscape in Flanagan and Wright

Both Flanagan and Wright describe beautiful landscapes, but their landscapes are always imbued with foreboding: either through violence, destruction or dispossession. "The spirit is the land" Aunt Ellie tells Aljaz (*River Guide* 204). Yet the ghosts in both Flanagan and Wright's works suggests not some metaphysical certainty that ghosts actually exist, only ontological uncertainty, as they might or might not empirically exist, a situation indicative of fear, anxiousness and possibly psychosis.

Maria's ghost is personal to Sonja, she dreams the apparition, and the ghost's words and actions allude to Sonja's anxiousness concerning both parents (*One Hand Clapping* 373). Similar ghosts populate many of Flanagan's and Wright's works, and have historical precedence, as evidenced in Praed's "The Bunyip" discussed in Chapter Four. When Oblivia or Aljaz encounter ghosts not only is the figure of the ghost "that which is neither present, nor absent, neither dead nor alive," but the protagonist as well (Davis 373).

There is a direct correlation between possession, or dispossession, of landscape and fear. Alexis Wright's *Plains of Promise* not only engenders fear, but thanatophillic, that is, death loving horror:

> With the storm edging closer, what light remained over the shaded river was suddenly overtaken by darkness. The thunder chased the headwaters into a wall of flood waters which gathered up speed, mud, dead branches, trees and dead animals as it moved swiftly down the river. (35)

The landscape itself is capable of characterful violence. Andrew Taylor's assertion of the female "other" has pertinence in *Carpentaria* ("A Case of Romantic Disinheritance" 35). Normal Phantom is violently assaulted by the wind, an elemental succubus if ever there was one:

> With the horror and shock of her unexpected arrival, Norm flinched at the wind driving him in his shoulder blades with the inhuman heaviness of two very strong hands. First, she pushed and kneaded, willing him to stand up, shaking the boat. Her invisible touch she replaced with a bolt of static electricity which dipped his every movement into her stinging body. A crackling feminine wail ran around him, embracing him, coaxing compliance with her desires. (*Carpentaria* 261)

A similarly characterful storm blows Maria Buloh so that "like an angel", "like a spectre" she flies into "the wild lands that lay …beyond that place that burnt like a fresh bullet hole in flesh" (*One Hand Clapping* 1).

The elemental aspects of desire – "the cost of its denial", "the force of its power" - are explored extensively in Flanagan's self-described "meditation on desire" ("Author's Note" *Wanting* 256). Flanagan often uses landscape and its agencies as a means to describe the various and complex expressions of those desires. Mathinna, whose only hope of redemption in her Protector's, George Augustus Robinson's, eyes is scriptural embrace, is taught the "devil dance[67]" when she returns to Wybalenna (217). Caught irredeemably between two worlds, Mathinna's conflicting desires are mirrored in the description of the landscape:

> The world was hennaed by a smoke haze that never ended, that brought the sky low and softened every view of the bleak and fantastic hills into something uncertain. The sun was no longer solid and sure but red and shaking. By day the air was full of the acrid smell of fires hundreds of miles distant, but the nights filled with the sound and shrieks of devil dancing. The evening she finally stood up to join in, Mathinna was speckled with charred leaves and blackened fronds that had been carried by the wind from the Australian mainland, to finally eddy and drift to earth at Wybalenna. (217-218)

It is only after death that the landscape, poetically and tempestuously described throughout *Wanting* becomes a "joy" to experience (247). As she is drowned in a puddle, Mathinna's world changes:

> All around her were trees older than knowing. If you held your face to their taut mossy bark, you could hear it all. It passed understanding. It defied words and spoke in dreams. She was flying through wallaby grass, her body no longer a torment but a joy. Soft threads of fine grass feathering beads of water onto her legs. The earth was her bare feet, wet and mushy in winter, dry and dusty in summer. (247)

Landscape in itself becomes a metaphor for desire. "The way we are denied love ... And the way we suddenly discover it being offered us, in all its pain and infinite heartbreak"

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[67] Robinson's description of the dance completely misses the point of why PLEEN.PER.REN.NER invented it (334-335). Kay Merry argues the dance was adaptive: that the "devil" was in fact the sealers. Inga Clendinnen also argues that such dancing was a way of inscribing Country, and coping with its loss (*True Stories* 37).

(239) is mirrored in how the landscape is perceived. The act of wanting and its subsequent repercussions informs the quiddity of what is perceived. Sir John's death is treated in similar vein:

> ... Sir John's thoughts were only of catching birds with a small dark girl who still laughed at him, and his head momentarily filled with the improbable smell of a world that he now recalled as Eden after rain. (177)

Wanting has been praised by Giles Foden for being "the literary equivalent of globalisation" because of its "multiplex" of views that are neither English nor Tasmanian (n.pag.). But Australians have always looked to the outside, rather than to the interior of their continent in attempting to explain their situation. Examples abound in Australian literature of a perception that the interior is at best a void. The perception, exemplified by Mr Pringle's observations in White's *Voss* persists to recent times. Kate Llewellyn's description of her narrator's attitude to the interior in her 2008 *The Dressmaker's Daughter* is typical:

> We always looked out towards the sea. It was as if we were hypnotised by the east. As though a spell had been cast on us and we were forbidden from looking behind us, like Orpheus. The inland lay behind is to the west and we never ventured there ... We acted as though there was nothing inland. As though there was this great yawn of emptiness, this gaping nothingness, threatening, empty and arid, holding nothing but danger or boredom. (5)

History through Landscape in Flanagan and Wright

Both Flanagan and Wright describe history through their description of landscape, suggesting the landscape is inscribed with history. Both writers describe sad and nihilist landscapes brought about by human action. When the narrator of *River Guide* describes Harry's "mind" watching "suppurating rivers that ran in garish pus-green and bloodied rills down those sad hills" (44), he is at once equating history, of 1946 Queenstown, with human agency, pollution, landscape and melancholy. Similar equations are made by Wright in all her novels where the history of Aboriginal

displacement and colonial and postcolonial violence equates with human agency, the rubbish tips of the Swamp in *The Swan Book* and the Pricklebush Mob in *Carpentaria,* and with melancholy. *Plains of Promise, Grog War* and *Carpentaria* all feature "eerie" "jarring" "panoramas" of "toxic waste" (*Swan Book* 58). However, there is an important difference between Flanagan and Wright in the way they portray history in such landscape. Flanagan is irredeemably melancholic. His landscapes are ultimately ones which cannot affirm the self. Wright's landscapes might be full of "history" where "the memories were too sad, too bad" but her landscapes are at times also musical and whimsical (*Plains of Promise* 282). The trauma of history, especially the history of the violence against the Indigenous, may be a concern of both writers, but it is only Wright who seems to be able to move beyond the horror of that violence. Edgar Mail in *The Swan Book* opines "You should remember that anyone can be a habitual colonist perpetually in search of difference to demystify myths, always trying to create new myths to claim as their own" (181). The descriptions of being Tasmanian in many of Flanagan's works could well be the attempt to create one's own myths in order to situate oneself in the landscape. Wright needs no such prop, her descriptions of northern Australian Indigeneity need no new myths to make a connection to a spiritual, that is self-affirming landscape. Her challenge is to recall what mythopoetic processes are already there.

In their re-imagined histories, both Flanagan and Wright also depict landscapes of erasure and contestation. Ivy's "Records were incomplete. There were no clues, official or otherwise, to prove if she had actually been taken away from St Dominic's" (*Plains of Promise* 282). Oblivia finds her world erased from the model world in Big Red's house when she finds "no eucalyptus tree trunk with strange writing in the dust …. She could not understand why this history did not exist in this world" (*Swan Book* 219). The

narrator of *The Swan Book* proposes that the erasure of history is something characteristically Australian:

> Only a few refugees from the city finally managed to reach the other side. The feral policeman leading the line … would … eventually be arrested and placed on trial for people smuggling, but not for genocide, or mass murder, which were crimes thought to be so morally un-Australian, it was officially denied that anything like it ever happened, like in the rhetoric of the history wars…. It never happened. Not in this country. (*Swan Book* 309)

In contrast, Flanagan continually undermines the histories he presents. De Silva in proclaiming "Gould's Book of Fish" (the book within the book) a fake, opines "History, Mr Hammet, is what you cannot see. History has power. But a fake has none" (*Book of Fish* 18). Flanagan asserts *Wanting* "is not a history" and "nor should it be read as one" (*Wanting* 255). Aljaz asks "Why do I feel as if I am being destroyed by history?" when he lives in a "country beyond history! Who had no future and no wanted past" (*River Guide* 264). Flanagan's Australian landscape is one of more postcolonial falsehoods than postcolonial denials.

Laconic humour in Flanagan and Wright

Both Wright and Flanagan are fundamentally nihilist writers who write in an Australian nihilist tradition of describing landscape as a reflection of the inner hopelessness of central protagonists. Using another Australian literary tradition, they often ameliorate that nihilism with humour.

The nihilism in both authors' works is undeniable. For example, the narrator in *Carpentaria*[68] has this to say about the landscapes of the grey, cold dream world where Angel Day "lived unhappily" catching snakes for a living:

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[68] Devlin-Glass says Wright's vision in *Carpentaria* is "bleak and separatist"

> The green-grey foul-smelling river, carried long severed heads of domesticated animals, fruit crates from bustling market-places, rotting fruit and vegetables thrown into the river as waste, corpses of white people whose lives had not been considered by anyone to be worth two bob, and the broken-hearted wares of many centuries of a poor civilisation. (254)

Similarly, in Flanagan's *Wanting*, nihilist landscape informs nihilist psyche:

> Cold rain blew hard, Robinson's party were lousy with vermin, and their low spirits were compounded by a loathsome distemper. They had for a month made their way through that astonished earth … They had forced passageways through cold rainforests, lost themselves in cloudgardens of hanging mosses ribboning the sky, trekked along vast beaches stunned by angry oceans … climbed ranges aching with desolation at the endlessness all around. (59)

Dorrigo Evans in *Narrow Road* never overcomes the haunting by the deaths of the prisoners of war, fearing "that only in them was the terrible perfection of suffering and knowledge that made one fully human" (27). The narrator's account of Ivy and her description of the St Dominic's Mission in *Plains of Promise* suggests the entire population of the mission suffers a psychosis induced by abuse, with no hope of redemption. The narrative resolution in these works written by both authors is not through the empowering of character or restoration of circumstance, but through total annihilation, often through death.

The bleak nihilism in Flanagan and Wright is often only ameliorated by humour. For example, the citizens of Desperance in *Carpentaria* debate erecting a big "something" to increase tourism (19). As readers familiar with the crumbling big icons that mar the landscape of many Australian towns, we know the idea is not going to work. The humour lies in the carnivalistic expectation that the venture will fail.

Authors who describe being Australian also often describe a laconic humour which underpins what Tom Inglis Moore sees as their ameliorating sympathy for their long-suffering characters ("Greek Gloom" 9). Understated dry humour is the humour

of the absurd: humour which is derived from the futility of individual quests to find meaning or purpose in a meaningless world. *Gould's Book of Fish* is a dark novel, which grows darker by the page. However, it also encapsulates the laconic Australian humour which is sympathetic in its understatement of the horror of being. Flanagan proposes a coat of arms which epitomises laconic humour when his character, Gould describes a "dramatick canvas" he paints for the local pub:

> I did a terrifying mural of a soft naked woman being dragged into a Hell of flaming acrobats & tumblers by a rather nasty looking bald eagle, beneath was inscribed the motto: *Ex Australis semper aliquid novi* (There's always something new out of Australia). *(75)*

Australian existential nihilism is characterised by the shimmering between its "Greek gloom", its humorous sympathy and its novel situation (Moore). This type of nihilism differentiates the Australian negotiation of some ontological dichotomies from those of South America or Canada. In the Australian version, like in Wright's *Carpentaria*, Hope and Will are dead, but the circumstances of their deaths have amusing elements.

Both Flanagan and Wright often use comedic techniques such as heteroglossic narrative as exemplified in the unexpected shifts in language, for example, between formal and informal registers and *argumentum ab auctoritate*, what Ivor Indyk refers to as encyclopaedism ("Provincialism" n.pag.). In *Carpentaria* Wright appeals to authority chiefly through musical references, naming works by Handel, Mozart, Bach and Puccini's *La Boeheme*. Wright's "subversive high-spirited vernacular voice" often jarringly slips between registers. In the space of a few pages, the narrator uses words such as "damu damu ngabaya "tinking" and "metamorphose", slipping in and out of formal vernacular and Aboriginal English and grammar. (Devlin-Glass "Carpentaria" 84, *Swan Book* 158, 158, 159). If the text is deliberately obscured by Waanyi words it is also obscured by the use of Italian and French words and phrases, such as "*succés*

d'estime" and "*cause célèbre"*, and as mentioned previously, by the use of suspect authority, for example her reference to "Ch'i Chi" (*Swan Book* 58, 57 303).

Flanagan concentrates his appeal to authority on references to the early Romantic. In *Gould's Book of Fish* for example, he deliberately misquotes Keats, refers to Wordsworth, incorporates references to some of the other Lake Poets, refers repeatedly and anachronistically to the works of the British ornithologist Richard Bowdler Sharpe, refers to fictive authorities, such as Sir Cosmo Wheeler's *Crania Tasmaniae* as if it were fact, while interweaving historical record, the actual, circa 1832, *Book of Fish* by William Buelow Gould, with historical fabrication. For example, Jørgen Jørgensen never set foot on Sarah Island as he does within the text. Moreover "The world, as described by Jorgen Jorgensen … was at war with … reality… The bad news was that reality was losing" (281).

Encyclopaedism allows solemn text to be quickly undermined by earthier prose, a heteroglossic technique which forms in Bakhtian terms a comically hybrid utterance. In *Gould's Book of Fish* the narrator Gould converses with Twopenny Sal about the wonder of the world. He tells her stories of London. She in turn tells him:

> … of how Van Diemen's Land was made, by the god Moinee striking the land & creating the rivers, by puffing away & blowing the earth up into mountains.
> 'And how was Macquarie Harbour made?' one day asked I. By Moinee?'
> 'Macquarie Harbour?' said she. 'Moinee's piss pot – *cobber*.' (150)

Description of the interplay between two distinct theistic systems generates humour, principally through misunderstandings, but also highlights the cultural collision and violent rupture the text describes. Flanagan's works are so nihilist that not one of his principal protagonists escapes either physical or emotional obliteration, and yet such events are described with humour characterised by its laconic understatement.

Nihilism is a difficult proposition to reconcile with happiness or even contentment and perhaps can only be done so through humour.[69] As Flanagan remarks, humour can be trusted the way justice never can be ("The Australian Disease" 11). John Marmysz notes that humour allows one to transcend the ontological boundaries imposed by one's cultural constraints (159). Humour reminds us, in Marmysz's words, that "we are not gods, and … humans cannot alter the fact that they possess only a finite amount of mastery and control over their own destinies" (160). Humour is a particular characteristic revered in the imagining of the Australian national psyche. Australian nihilism, expressed as individuals confronting "harshness defeat and failure" is above all characterised by its humour (Ian Turner and Gary Sturgess 89, Jones). Humour is, as Marmysz notes, a response to nihilism that does not lead to despair. Hence Flanagan and Wright's laconic humour. Even *Narrow Road,* arguably the bleakest of Flanagan's novels, has moments of intense laconicism. Tiny, in working too hard, creates problems for the other prisoners of war. Someone needs to tell him:

> For fucking fuck's sake, tell him, Sheephead Moreton said to Darky.
> Tell him what?
> E-fucking-nough. *Nough.*
> Nough nough or just nough?
> Fuck off. (182)

Expletive infixation and linguistic clipping identify Darky and Sheephead as uneducated and potentially comic characters. The same technique of dialogue marking is used by Henry Lawson and Arthur Davis, writing as Steele Rudd. The humour alleviates the seriousness of the situation. Tiny in *Narrow Road* is in danger of working everyone to death. Flanagan uses a similar technique in *Book of Fish* a work he describes during a

[69] William Stanner recounts just such a use of humour when he writes of an Indigenous Elder who, challenged with the proposition that his race is dying out, laughingly points out that all the white men will die too, because there will be no one to track them when they get lost ("Aboriginal Humour").

Guardian web-chat as a "tragicomedy" (n.pag.). Humour is important, Flanagan asserts. "It is the last defence of humanity when it has had everything else stolen from it" (n.pag.).

Wright's humour is more satirical than Flanagan's. She parodies non-Indigenous bureaucracy, religion, and self-importance in passages that rely more on situation than language to express that humour. The fact that the Pricklebush mob start comparing crucifixes or that Angel now owns "the luck of the white people" because of the lick of paint she's applied to a garbage tip Virgin Mary demonstrates that there is an edge to this humour (*Carpentaria* 39, 23). Humour as a last defence is what Larissa Behrendt calls "a powerful antidote to the trauma, harm and hurt that comes with racism" ("Aboriginal Humour" n.pag.).

Moore's idea that bleak humour arises from landscape implies that it ultimately arises from the perception of landscape. Landscape perception, as has been argued throughout this thesis, is intertwined with perceptions of being, culture and history. Martin Flanagan writes of how "What happened in this country can most benignly be described as a cultural collision, and debris is scattered from one side of the continent to the other" (n.pag.). It is the debris of this collision, in the attempt to describe the "emptiness and loss…anxieties, madness and …loneliness…determined by cognition of the self" that is often the focus of Flanagan's and Wright's works (Gao 200). Alcohol abuse in *Grog War*, institutional abuse in *Plains of Promise*, non-Indigenous environmental rapaciousness in *Carpentaria* and *Swan Book*, repressed Indigenous history in *Death of A River Guide* and *Wanting,* and trying to maintain identity in a foreign landscape in *One Hand Clapping* are all concerns borne of the cultural collision Martin Flanagan describes. Both Flanagan and Wright seek to describe the landscapes of what Inga Clendinnen calls the "scar on the face of the country" (*True Stories* 103). Clendinnen argues that the

scar takes the form of a "false tale" called Australian History. In so far as landscape features the "scratches" of human endeavour it reflects an "interiority which matches the land itself" (31). Both Flanagan and Wright use landscape to mirror that interiority. Gazing upon Mathinna's body, Garney stands silent. "Mist was filling the valley and everything was lost in its soft white shroud…he felt increasingly lost in a dream" (Flanagan *Wanting* 250). Given that the interiority of which Clendinnen writes is one of denial, a "stain" of "injustice" and "exclusion" particularly of the Indigenous, but also of the "Other", as Flanagan demonstrates with his descriptions of working class and migrant characters, it is understandable that both authors write extensively of despair (*True Stories* 102).

Yet the despair is continually undermined. William Buelow Gould from Flanagan's *Book of Fish*, writing in his deluged prison cell is supposedly educated on "6-penny books" (59). He writes of Auberon, Keats, Blake, Shakespeare, Constable, Pope, Robespierre, Marat, even Jeremy Bentham as if they are familiars, and as such adequate to describe the situation in which he finds himself. The resulting *argumentum ab auctoritate* gives a comic tinge to what in many ways is a darkly foreboding novel.

In a similar process of amelioration, *Carpentaria* parodies European mythologies, including Christianity. The re-interpretation of religion by the messianic Elias and Big Mozzie's proselytising, plays a major role in establishing an unexpected view of the world in the novel. Norman tells Bala "he believed in the Bible because the white people had prospered by believing in what the Bible had told them" (510). But this Christian God must compete with many others. While Will watches the destruction of the hotel the narrator describes his thoughts:

> It was at this point he realised how history could be obliterated when the Gods move the country. He saw history rolled, reshaped, undone and mauled as the great

> creators of the natural world engineered the bounty of everything man had ever done in this part of the world into something more of their own making. (491-492)

The result is the reader is presented with an unresolvable ontological oscillation between the perceived and the expected. The fantastic is tinged with nihilism. Will imagines history "undone and mauled" (488).

Conclusion

Both Flanagan and Wright address several aspects of Australian postcolonial writing in divergent and heterogenic ways. Both concern themselves with Indigeneity, just as many White postcolonial Australian authors did. With the exception of the present day, albeit dying Aljaz, who claims Black Pearl as an ancestor due to her rape in 1828, Flanagan sets all his Indigenous Aboriginal characters in a mythical past presented through a White optic (*River Guide* 311-318). His imagined modern day aboriginality is not of the Indigenous, but more to do with Tasmania's rural poor. Wright on the other hand, not only describes present day Indigeneity, but imagines a future Indigeneity. The expression of a White indigeneity through mythic prose show Flanagan's desire to describe the experience of being born Tasmanian. Wright on the other hand expresses a desire to shift mainly White assumptions about what it means to actually be Indigenous. Flanagan wishes to describe and invent mythologies that place his being as Tasmanian; Wright describes and at times, because of cultural obliteration, invent mythologies that describe her narrators as placing their being in an Indigenous context. Both are fraught tasks. Flanagan has to at once acknowledge and reimagine the treatment of Tasmanian Aborigines, and place his own desire to describe what it is to belong to Tasmania in that context. Wright must undermine presumptions, re-invent colonial and postcolonial trauma and indeed imagine a future landscape. It is no surprise therefore, that just like the landscapes of the postcolonial authors mentioned in Chapter Five, Flanagan and Wright both have landscapes of binaries – at once Romantically beautiful, but

Gothically horrible. Their worlds are both "bad" and "sad" – landscapes "soaked in blood" and strewn with rubbish. A common way forward for both authors is laconic humour. But only Wright offers, albeit fleetingly, more than the thin sliver of hope Flanagan proffers, for example, in the last page of *River Guide,* when Aljaz becomes one with a sea-eagle. Unlike many of the non-Indigenous postcolonial authors whose characters are swallowed, lost in or obliterated by landscape, it is only Wright, particularly in *The Swan Book*, who imagines a future for hers.

According to Margaret Merrilees "Settler Australia is still searching for a way of belonging in an alien land" (65). Geoffrey Bolton writes of his equivocated hope of Australians adopting "a religious respect for the land" (178). Both Bolton's and Merrilees' views are predicated on the view that non-Indigenous Australians crave a spiritual connection to landscape, for the landscape to be their affirming *genius loci.* The argument, which ultimately equates Indigeneity with spirituality, suffers from the White Aboriginal viewpoint that Karen Barker argues against (109). The resulting desires, the desire for reconciliation with the Indigenous population or the desire to return the land to an imagined pre-European state itself, indicate for Merrilees a continuing uneasiness, as "confidence of rightful possession" is absent (67). Perhaps the case is overstated, as it presumes the desire for mythical affinity with the bush is still valid. But as Nonie Sharp observes:

> A literature of place, [can] ... only thrive when people's hearts [are] ... with Australian places. [Such] writing has now begun to take hold in Australia so offering an opportunity to look back and deepen our understanding of times marked by its absence. (354)

Sharp is optimistic: a literature of place can only occur if there is familiarity with that place. The landscapes Wright and Flanagan describe are rarely urban, and as such are often unfamiliar to their intensely urban Australian readers.

In an open letter concerning the inequities of the Northern Territory intervention[70] Alexis Wright writes "It is high time for looking towards hope, rather than continually recording the despair…" ("Talking About Tomorrow" n.pag.). Literature, even nihilist literature, must have what Wright calls the "…corners of the soul where joy can be found" ("Politics of Writing" n.pag.). Harry Heseltine, writing some 40 years before Wright, believes attempts to "acknowledge the terror at the basis of being, to explore its uses, and to build defences against its dangers" is the "special force" needed to drive Australian literature (49). It is these forces, particularly in relation to Australian Indigenous literature which emerged from the 1970s on, that form some of the concerns of the magic nihilist characteristics of the modern era, discussed in the next chapter.

[70] The Northern Territory National Emergency Response Act 2007 ('the intervention") was a Federal Government intervention involving changes to welfare, law enforcement, land tenure in 2007 and involved the deployment of 600 soldiers. The intervention was initially brought about by allegations of systemic child abuse in Indigenous communities, but quickly broadened its focus to a whole raft of issues and restrictions affecting everyday life (J and S Altman and Russel) and is scheduled to continue until 2022.

7: Magic and nihilism in the modern era

Introduction

The abandonment of the White Australia Policy by the Whitlam government in 1973; the recognition of Aboriginal people as Australian citizens in 1968; foreign and domestic policy which increasingly saw Australia as culturally separated from Great Britain; and the wider notice of Australian Aboriginal literature, particularly since the 1990s, are some of the hallmarks of the modern era in Australian literature, defined in this thesis as the period from 1973 to the present. The modern era also sees a ludic subversiveness, playing with expectations of landscape, Indigeneity and nationality and throwing open once again issues that have figured in Australian literature since Colonisation.

Image has been removed as it contains copyright material.

'Totemic Tumult' by Eddie Barrup, an Aboriginal artist invented by Elizabeth Durack. The painting was first exhibited in 'Native Titled Now' Tandanya, Adelaide, South Australia in 1996. It was pulled down and censured while on tour in Victoria March 1997. (Durack 1995)

Indigenous writing, principally arising since the 1978 publication of Monica Clare's *Karobran: the story of an Aboriginal girl* has for the most part re-animated the landscape. Australian landscape is seen as being both alive and personally affirmative by many Indigenous authors (Heiss "Blak" 140). May in Tara Winch's 2016 *Swallow the Air* sees trees being flung back and forth "like the concave of lungs" even as she remembers the details of a violent fight (52). Later May realises "This land is belonging, all of it for all of us. This river is that ocean, these clouds are that lake, these tears are not only my own" (102). Indigeneity allows access to landscape's vitality, an attribute sometimes

missing in non-Indigenous descriptions. In her 2010 memoir *Listening to Country,* Ros Moriarty writes of "powerful culture and the everyday balance of a satisfying life lived in harmony with the elements" (1-2). Later she writes that in contemporary Australia "the riches of mind, body and spirit that Aboriginal people had painstakingly nurtured for thousands of years would fade from memory and practice forever", the implication being non-Indigenous Australians are incapable of making such connections to Country (47). Notwithstanding that implication, the connection with Country can be read as being on some levels an Indigenous equivalency to Romantic concerns. When Norm and Bala walk hand in hand through a chorus of frogs "singing the country afresh" in *Carpentaria* (516), or when Oblivia calls to Country amidst the desolation of the old dry swamp in *The Swan Book* (333-334), or when Jo experiences a misty morning on Bundjalung land that feels "miraculous" with such an intensity she can "barely express" her reverence in Lukashenko's *Mullumbimby* (Kindle Loc. 5414) they are expressing not just a connection to Country, but a desire to "go to Nature", as Victor Kennedy put it. It is an apparent equivalence of the desire which stirs John and Cray's emotions as they sit at a campfire listening to elders "possessed by the spirit of the land and of dead generations … sing all together, as the blue smoke-spires wafted dimly up into the darkness above the embers," a passage written by Elliot Grant Watson nearly a hundred years ago (*The Mainland* 133). The difference, however, is that John and Cray are interlopers, observers of the other, outsiders to the experience in ways which the Indigenous writers described above are clearly not.

Recalling Wright's insistence of using Waanyi words often without translation, the impediments to describing connection with Country are culturally ingrained and linguistic. Melissa Lucashenko tells Anne Brewster that describing landscape in Indigenous language literally "comes with the territory," making the implicit point that

English, as a colonising language, simply does not have the word-hoard to describe a non-English landscape, and the relationship between landscape (Brewster *Giving this Country* 122). The clearly strong and affirming identification with landscape is almost universally accompanied in modern era Indigenous texts by the use of words and phrases of Indigenous languages.

The viewpoints of Indigenous writers such as Lucashenko and Winch lie in stark contrast to an often expressed non-Indigenous viewpoint. In Murray Bail's 1980 *Homesickness*, Louisa tells Anna how she feels about country when she says:

> We come from a country ... of nothing really... We can appear quite heartless at times ... Even before we travel we're wandering in circles... We have rather empty feelings ... (393)

The disquiet non-Indigenous feel concerning landscape is not just a concern of Bail's. Time and again, non-Indigenous writers, even when enthralled with the landscape as Tim Winton is, describe a "lingering unease":

> ... the past clearly bothers us, even if we're not conscious of it. Despite my conviction that non-indigenous Australians are more at home on this continent, and that progress has been made politically to address some shocking aspects of invasion and settlement, there is still a lingering unease. (*Island Home* Kindle Loc. 1079-81)

The ontological frictions for a writer such as Lucashenko of describing intimacy with landscape in a language, English, inadequate for the task leads to its own challenges. In her essay "Not quite white in the head" Lukashenko writes of "earthspeaking" "talking about this place, my home", a "Land [that] Is Not Cursed" (23), but also writes of "exile", of a "peculiar form of illness, and of blindness" arising from being distanced from one's Country (27). For a writer such as Winton, describing a landscape that is capable of engendering "lingering unease" is perversely complicated by a desire to avoid disappointment when attributing to landscape psychically

redemptive powers, such as being able to derive certain emotions and spiritual uplift by merely gazing upon it. A suspicion forms in reading many non-Indigenous modern era texts that these expectations are incapable of being fulfilled, no matter how magnificent the landscape. The landscape is desired to be something it is not.

Landscape and Indigeneity

Throughout the modern era non-Indigenous authors describe protagonists who crave the same spiritual access to landscape they perceive in the Indigenous. David Malouf's 2007 short story "Mrs Porter and The Rock" is a case in point. The story centres on a slightly comic older woman, set in her ways, who has something of an existential epiphany through her engagement with Uluru. At breakfast with her son Donald, who writes in a journal of the place being like Coleridge's Xanadu, she looks up to see on the canopy above the "splayed toes of some giant black acrobat" (14). The vision is unsettling and reminds her of the "apparitions" she's been seeing lately (14). The rock becomes strange, "*It* is everywhere" and looks like "a great slab of purple-brown liver" reminding her of the transition between life and death of a fish she watches at the age of seven. (18). "Suddenly it has plonked itself down in the middle of people's lives like something that has just landed from outer space, or pushed up out of the centre of the earth…" (18). Later, Mrs Porter sees the rock:

> …darkly veined and shimmering …sitting like a cloud a hundred feet above the earth. It had simply risen up, ignoring the millions of tons it must weigh, and was stalled there on the horizon like an immense spacecraft, and the light it gave off was a sound with a voice at the centre of it saying, Look at this So, what do you reckon now? (35)

The vision gives her an "immediate and unaccountable happiness" (35). Hovering "a foot above the carpet" she leaves her resort room, and heads off towards the Rock (25). The next morning children find her at its base. She realises with certainty that she "will

live forever" (43).

Dulcie Porter's engagement of being with the monumental landscape of Uluru is not, Bridgit Grogan argues, just lyric "ecological phenomenology" (69). The story is also a modernist take on the expectation of Romantic transcendentalism through landscape, a theme recurrent throughout non-Indigenous Australian literature. Grogan argues "Malouf's sometimes ironic Romanticism combines with his postcolonialism to question Enlightenment and colonialist assumptions" (71). Grogan defends her point of view against Andrew McCann whose criticism of "Mrs Porter" is that the inferred sacredness of the rock is symptomatic of "postcolonial disquiet, and a path of light that promises to lead beyond this, and beyond history itself"' ("Obstinacy" 158). Like many other texts, "Mrs Porter" shows the landscape and Aboriginal presence in the landscape as being out of step with the present, as in many of the Jindyworobak poems, or as a presence of haunting, such as is implied in Kate Grenville's *The Secret River*, or even one of almost shamanic potency, for example, Sam Watson's *Kadaitcha Sung*.

David Abram proposes that Merleau-Pontian phenomenology is the only philosophical approach amenable to the restoration of a "balanced" human-nature relationship, arguing that indigenous philosophies regarding environment access self-affirming phenomenologies (*The Spell Of The Sensuous* 4). The implication of his argument is that "balanced" human-nature relationships are only sought by the non-indigenous as the indigenous are already in balance (4). Meg Holden, while generally disagreeing with Abram's views, does agree that Abram's "balanced" proposition is a "useful conceptual framework for understanding the environmental ethics of oral cultures" while suggesting a more useful approach may be plain pragmatism (38, 37). Indigenous cultures may have their special relationship with landscape simply because they need to survive within it. Abram's argument infers the possibility of White

Aboriginality, an argument Karen Barker, previously discussed, critiques. Non-Indigenous Australian authors who seek a White indigenous understanding of the land often do so in ways, such as conferring on the Indigenous a unity with Nature, that can be ultimately racist. If Indigenous authors describe landscape in pragmatic terms and non-Indigenous authors describe landscape in culturally privileged transcendental terms, then one might expect fundamental differences in the way those writers describe their worlds. For example, Alexis Wright describes a post climate-change world in *The Swan Book,* but the eco-poetical concerns expressed there and in *Carpentaria* are pragmatic: the inference is that the appropriation of Indigenous spirituality by the non-Indigenous does not necessarily lead to ecological harmony. Indeed, Wright parodies the concerns of environmentalists:

> These men claimed to be the policemen over this stretch of country, although in the real world, they were only a bunch of intergenerational environmentalists, turned greenies, turned ferals …" (*Swan Book* 305)

The idea that an "oral" culture is imbued with a mysticism which harmonises it with nature is a modern western conceit, not necessarily one of the Australian Indigenous, whose concerns might be of more pressing issues about discrimination and land rights (Tucker and Grim 11). Nonetheless the conceit creates a situation where the non-Indigenous crave the same spiritual relation to landscape they perceive is possessed by the Indigenous. From a White optic the landscape is expected to have a spiritual potentiality for the non-Indigenous, but that potentiality is continually eroded. The desire to have historical, spiritual and cosmological connection with land, yet not achieve it, creates what Anne Brewster calls a "desperation" "crisis" of the non-Indigenous ("Crisis of Whiteness" 86). Whiteness becomes, Brewster argues, "a condition of disavowed conflictedness" portrayed in a novel such as *Carpentaria* through the "farcical" "putative authority" of the White inhabitants of Desperance (86).

Through the modern Indigenous optic the situation becomes more complex, as landscape is spiritually significant: "A country and its people are bounded in such a way that it can be seen as a closed system" (Rose *Dingo* 222).

In *Reports from the Wild Country* Deborah Bird Rose writes of the wildness of the Australian landscape being enmeshed in the violence of colonial history, to the extent that Australians are deaf to the possibility of quiet country, and the ethical vision that a landscape engenders, where we, the reader, are invited to be a participatory agent in creation (48). Rose asks that the non-Indigenous renew their regard for Aboriginal voices in that landscape; voices that were muted and mutated by colonisation and which consequently desire to be heard. The desire to be heard also informs the plea in the opening sentence of Wright's *Carpentaria*. Wright's landscapes, often peopled with ghosts, sometimes themselves become the animate spectre, often through voice. The narrator of Wright's short story "When Devils Call", who has just killed his companion Anita, relates:

> Unseen rain falls in the darkness on smooth and slippery rock. And her voice, wasp-like, knives over the wet rocks, through the crevices far into the night. She penetrates with sharp jabs through the soles of my feet. (224)

This is a post-Jungian conceit, in that the landscape is anthropomorphised by the anima. The idea that the landscape provides humanity with its anima and animus is explored by David Abram saying in conversation with Patricia Damery that human senses evolved to be in "participatory rapport with every aspect of the animate landscape" so much so that the human "sensing body easily and spontaneously slides into conversation with other facets of the surrounding terrain" (112). Not only are Thoreau and Emerson recalled in the sacred regard for the land, but also Merleau-Ponty who ultimately

proposed an ontology of *la chair du monde* - the flesh of the world - evoking a visceral landscape (*Sense and Non-Sense*)[71].

Carmen Concilio in writing of David Malouf's 1993 *Remembering Babylon* maintains "… the existence … of the Aborigines, and the presence of a huge void in the landscape are the main causes of terror for the white settlers, the reality of whose world depends on the words they use to name it" (43). Geographer Donald Meinig argues all landscapes are symbolic of elements such as culture, social behaviour, individual action, which constitute the psyche. The two arguments in synthesis propose a terrifying landscape for the non-Indigenous. The above arguments suggest not only a dualism of approach between the Indigenous and non-Indigenous, but binarisms of intent. The landscape appears rubbish strewn, beautiful, pristine, utilised, malignant, mothering and vast but nothing.

Ecological concerns

The modern era sees the rise of writing concerned with ecological issues. Wilderness - the idea of a pristine landscape – is often inexorably bound in these texts with Indigeneity, and leads to some troubling propositions. The notion that the landscape, before European settlement, was pristine, a wilderness not marred by human activity - engenders the risk of either supposing Indigenous use of the landscape had no material effect, which as Bill Gammage in *Biggest Estate,* Eric Rolls in *They all Ran Wild,* and Bruce Pascoe in *Dark Emu* have demonstrated, is simply incorrect, or, worse, that Indigenous use of landscape is somehow natural. The idea that Indigeneity is a natural

[71] Merleau-Ponty's essay is anti-empiricist in a way that evokes Mudrooroo's description of Maban writing. Empiricism, according to such a view fails to see the world as experienced by a body which is socially and environmentally associative. To experience a body one must experience boundaries. It is through the body's senses that consciousness can reach beyond the self, and the senses become integral to what the consciousness is. Thus, a sense is not just a connection between the world and the self, but an agent which allows the simultaneous experience of the world through observation and interaction.

way of being reduces the humanity of the Indigenous, and probably harks back to the *fin de siècle* ideas equating certain non-Western cultures, including those of the Australian Aboriginals, with infancy, and even psychosis. These ideas are exemplified in Sigmund Freud's *Totem and Taboo* in which he describes Australia as the youngest, that is least advanced, of the continents inhabited by "the most backward and miserable of races" which he equates directly with an "archaic" and perishing fauna (2). Freud's racist evolutionary theory does not overtly inform, but certainly haunts some views on the worthiness of ecological preservation. Freud's assumptions are based on Ernst Haeckel's[72] ideas on evolutionary recapitulation, which proposes that special evolution is recapitulated in the development of the individual (Gould "Chapter Four" *Ontogeny and Phylogeny*). Social Darwinists drew on this to assume a European child, for example, assumes the same innocence and animality as the "primitive" just as a human embryo at a stage of its development has gills. In this regard, insofar as non-Indigenous Australian writers portrayed the Indigenous in the postcolonial era - one only has to think of Henry Kendall, George Gordon McCrae, Charles Harpur, James Bonwick, Rosa Praed, Herbert Basedow, Daisy Bates, Patrick White, Randolph Stow and Tom Keneally - they did so by describing them as childlike, noble savages, cunning and dangerous or pathetic and passive, figures of fun, or a doomed people destined to vanish from the continent (Kosmas Tsokhas). The assumptions, even though they imbued Indigenous studies with a certain urgency as it was generally supposed that Aboriginal people were dying out, were by no means benign. Non-Indigenous authors of the modern era who portray the Indigenous, for example, Grenville, Keneally, Malouf and Flanagan often do so out of time. There are however notable exceptions to the above argument. Peter Goldsworthy's 1989 *Maestro* not only delicately alludes to Indigenous trauma, for

[72] Haeckel is the same man who coined "ecology".

example when Reggie Lim gets left in Darwin when the band Rough Stuff goes to Adelaide, but he describes landscapes that are not mediated by Tim Winton's "unease":

> Rain was falling outside; the perfumes of the earth folded back on themselves and multiplied. The rich, dank air filled my nostrils. I wanted to be out in the warm rain, pushing through the wet vegetation, physically part of it. The world and l were moulded from the same substances, l knew: we shared the same pollens, scents, sexual triggers, the same cycles of fertility; the same molecules. (114)

In his essay "The Trouble with Wilderness" William Cronon points out that the first national parks to be promulgated in the United States - Yellowstone, Yosemite, Grand Canyon, Rainier, and Zion - were national parks of *sublime* landscapes. While those landscapes were used by indigenous populations they were, when promulgated, not degraded landscapes. Cronon argues the Romantic boundaries to ecological thinking created by the magnificent American national parks subsumes a whole raft of concerns including air pollution and urban water quality. At least in the American experience there are sublime landscapes to call sacred. In the Australian context the landscape has often become for the non-Indigenous an irrelevancy whose only importance is in its potential commoditisation (Tonts and Greive).

Cronon makes a further interesting point about the potentiality of wilderness landscapes to act as an erasure of history. As wilderness, he argues, is bound up in the idea of being empty of human inhabitation, the mere declaration of an area as wilderness erases the very possibility of indigenous inhabitants within the landscape. In so far as sublimity is a theistic concern it can be argued that the Australian Indigenous regard of landscape shares at least a sense of spirituality with the Romantics (Rose *Nourishing Terrains*). Romantic and Indigenous perspectives alike see a relationship

between landscape, psychic well-being and health[73]. If all that is left is a degraded landscape, then that has troubling repercussions for such spirituality. It is one of the great and uncommented ironies of White perception of the rural Australian Indigenous that they are simultaneously regarded as custodians of land because of their perceived harmonic sympathy with the environment, while they often find themselves settled in dystopian communities situated on the edges of towns, where they are decried for their apparent lack of pride in what is often their third-world, or, according to Chadwick Allen "fourth-world" living conditions (9). Wright calls such places "wonderland[s] of non-conformist reality" (*Grog War* 263). The dichotomy again points to the possibility that what the non-Indigenous admires or decries in the Indigenous response to landscape is actually the ambivalent nature of the non-Indigenous response itself.

Since colonisation Australian White mythologies have been very much concerned with battling the landscape. Pioneers battling the land through flood, fire, drought, and snakes to name a few agencies of the landscape, imbue wilderness with malevolence. The equation that correlates Indigenous presence with natural force, the idea that the Indigenous are in themselves a part of Nature, allows the landscape to be viewed as exploitable wilderness, a theme that is still interrogated in modern Australian literature, for example Andrew McGahan's 2010 *The White Earth*.

Another mythology also persists from colonial times, that of the drear, monotonous landscape such as described in any Henry Lawson story[74]. The inability to perceive human agency in a drear monotonous landscape engenders the possibility of relinquishing the agencies of ego to a landscape which is not only the lacuna of the

[73] Mudrooroo quotes Bill Neidjie: "What for you cutting this land? …Cause your granny, your mother, your brother, because this earth, this ground, this piece of ground e grow you" (*Us Mob* 52). Later, Mudrooroo states "…the health of us mob depends on the health of our land, that if the land suffers, so do we" (126).

[74] Lawson's description of the country beyond Nyngan is typical: "After Nyngan the bush grew darker and drearier; and the plains more like ghastly oceans…" ("In a Wet Season" 301).

affirming experience, but an agent of misery, even of horror (Liberman 42). Henry Lawson at the end of the nineteenth century railed against a landscape that wasn't "anything … you can think of" ("The Bush" 31). It is noteworthy that Lawson's lacuna of 1897 Federation Australia is still an issue by the time Murray Bail writes "nothing really" in *Homesickness* in 1980 (393) or Richard Flanagan writes of "ranges aching with desolation at the endlessness all around" in his 2008 *Wanting* (59) or Tim Winton writes of his "twinge of terror because the sky seems to go on forever" in his 2015 *Island Home* (Kindle loc. 299-302).

Image has been removed as it contains copyright material.

This tree was behind Mount Campion near Dorrigo. At 61cms from the ground its girth was 17.69 metres. Henry Lawson, in his February 1897 essay, decried poets describing "boles of gigantic size ... which ... never was in bush scenery" (32). Lawson writes as if the existence of such monumental artefacts of landscape are anathema to his thesis of the settler pioneer. The undated and unattributed photo appears in Alex Gaddes' Red Cedar our Heritage (168).

Indigenous memoir and history

Much of the modern era's Indigenous writing, as exemplified by the autobiographical histories of Robert Bropho's *Fringedweller*, Sally Morgan's *My Place* or Larissa Behrendt's *Home*, and the retelling of wider histories in Kim Scott's *That Deadman Dance* or Philip McLaren's *Sweet Water – Stolen Land*, seek, as Martin Renes argues, to depart from "documentary reflections" to offer a fictionalised account of "silenced history", that is, works which offer little attempt to base their fictions in any academically rigorous historical veracity (103). All the above writers experiment with modes of Indigenised and non-Indigenised storytelling, possibly as a way of approaching the issues of Indigenous identity in circumstances where identity is

circumspect because of issues such as dislocation, loss of language, and absence of societal power. There appears in many of these texts an inferred belief that fiction generally is a more viable means to describe verities concerning being Aboriginal in a colonising society than writing accounts whose veracity may be interrogated through a historical record, for example, one that implicitly privileges a colonising narrative (Kunhikrishnan). As Wright points out, fictionalisation of experience is sometimes the only means available to create a truer reflection of reality:

> I felt literature, the work of fiction, was the best way of presenting a truth- not the real truth, but more of a truth than non-fiction, which is not really the truth either. Non-fiction is often about the writer telling what is safe to tell … I use literature to try and create a truer replica of reality. ("Politics of Writing" 13-14)

Stephen Muecke argues Indigenous writers inevitably find themselves confronted with a dilemma: either they write histories attuned to Western ideals of *historia*, and confront the difficulty of inscribing texts with the "politics of race relations" or they can adopt fictional conventions, thereby inviting the possibility of that aesthetic becoming the primary critical means by which their work is received (*Textual Spaces* 74). Thus Indigenous histories become contested, and even Indigenous fiction authors are suspected of appropriating magic realism merely in order to sell well (Maria Takolander "Magic Realism").

Australian Indigenous literature has proliferated over some decades, and is characterised by two distinct tropes. The first requires the inscription of an Indigenous account of history and landscape as experienced by the Indigenous since settlement. Landscape for the Indigenous is capable of being a cultural text that can be read, argues J. and N. Duncan, like any other. For the Indigenous, it is often the *primary* cultural text: the ability to read landscape informs one's access to culture. Not only is the landscape inscribed, it becomes the surface on which our perceptions are written, according to

Bernard Cache, as images among images. (Allen, McGaw and Pieris, Muecke *Textual Spaces, Ancient and Modern,* Cache xvi). Thus Country becomes central to the Indigenous attempts to give an accurate historical account of events such as removal to missions, stolen generations and massacres. Larissa Behrendt explores Indigenous issues in both *Home* and *Legacy*. Both works arguably fictionalise real events, but do so within the accepted confines of historical narrative. These works may sometimes blur boundaries between historical fact and fiction, but can be read as doing so to enhance the vividness of a history ephemeralised by its previous lack of inscription in anything but statistical and institutional record.

History provides a narrative by which a society can belong to a landscape. Landscape and history become a dyad whose elements are constantly informing how each are perceived. When the landscape becomes contested, history itself becomes contested. Australia's so-called history wars are in part a product of that contestation. Texts such as Sally Morgan's *My Place,* Mudrooroo's *Long Live Sandawara* and *Doctor Wooreddy's Prescription,* Doris Pilkington's (Nugi Garimara's) *Rabbit Proof Fence,* even a film such as Rachel Landers' 2008 *A Northern Town,* have come under White criticism because of their "harsh generalisation" (Ashleigh Wilson reviewing *A Northern Town* n.pag.) "a betrayal of trust" (Tony Thomas on *My Place* n.pag.), "lies" (Andrew Bolt on Philip Noyce's film version of *Rabbit Proof Fence* n.pag.), "derivative", inferring appropriation of Ion Idriess' research (Shoemaker on *Sandawara* "Fact and historical Fiction" n.pag.) and "a complete parody" of "real" historical accounts by George Augustus Robinson (Maureen Clark in *Mudrooroo A Likely Story* discussing *Dr Wooreddy 53*). These texts lie at the boundary of historical experience between the Indigenous and non-Indigenous, and because those experiences differ according to possession and dispossession of the landscape, they attract White ire through the recounting of

Indigenous history which implicitly questions White assumptions concerning White history within the landscape. In that respect, there is a theme in Indigenous literature of recounting personal and wider histories as a response to the complacent non-Indigenous imagining of that history. Thus autobiographical elements feature in Monica Clare's *Karobran*, Tony Birch's *Blood* and Larissa Behrendt's *Home,* a novel inspired, Behrendt tells Claire Scobie, by the Howard Government's "callous indifference" to the 1997 *Bringing Them Home Report* (n.pag.).

Indigenous memoir and history highlights a challenge of non-Indigenous writing. Extending the Merleau-Pontian argument of the second chapter, one cannot be if one cannot be in the landscape, and being in the landscape requires a history of being in the landscape. Much of the desire by the non-Indigenous of Indigenous ways of being can be read as a yearning for what Karen Barker describes as a "white Aboriginality" (107). Germaine Greer explains "We [the non-Indigenous] hate this country because we cannot allow ourselves to love it. We know in our hearts' core that it is not ours" ("Whitefella" 7). By conceding Australia to be an "Aboriginal country" Greer imagines a renewed national identity (2).

Aboriginal reality

The landscape as a void representing something lost, or no longer there, can be read as a metonym for marginalisation. The metonym often offers no panacea to the predicament of identity or chimera of reality unless it refers specifically to Indigenous cultural morés in ways which may infer magic realism but are in fact more akin to Barker's Aboriginal realism or Mudrooroo's Maban reality, a thesis proposed in 1997, and which still informs discussion of many Indigenous texts, particularly Wright's *Carpentaria* (Renes 103, Starrs). Mudrooroo wrote of Wilfred (Sam) Watson's *The*

Kadaitcha Sung[75], that the narration takes the Indigenous novel into a new realm of reality beyond European "scientific reality" into a reality of Indigenous spiritualism and narrative techniques which he labels "Maban reality" (*Indigenous Literature* 98). Mudrooroo was acutely aware of the issues of Indigeneity and Indigenous history, a fact recognised by both the Indigenous, such as Ruby Langford Ginibi, and non-Indigenous, for example, Devlin-Glass "Carpentaria and its critics". Even so, Mudrooroo's own exercises in Maban reality, such as *Dr Wooreddy* can be seen as being weakened by a non-Indigenous expectation that *Dr Wooreddy* reads like an Indigenous novel. In a foreword to *Wild Cat Falling* by Mary Durack[76] epitomises the troubling sentiment: she writes Mudrooroo is at least "part Aboriginal", writing "his features would not have betrayed him" (Durack 7). At the same time, and tellingly, she stresses his non-Aboriginality saying he has not "inherited the typical instability of the out-camp people" (8). Stephen Muecke says Durack's introduction seems to suggest that Aboriginal heritage is something "that can only get in the way" (*Textual Spaces* 31). Mudrooroo's work becomes an "exercise" to deflect "the pointed bone of Aboriginal heritage" ameliorating his contested Indigeneity by expressing it via the tropes of the non-Indigenous (31). Mudrooroo conforms to Durack's European notion of what an Aboriginal *should* write.

Gerhard Fischer states in *Across the Lines* Mudrooroo's notorious "predicament about his identity" crystallised by Durack's imagining is "inscribed onto his body: by the colour of his skin" (233). Mudrooroo[77] has certainly been outspoken about his acute

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[75] *The Kadaitcha Sung* shares certain themes (for example, the poisoning of water holes) with Henrietta Drake-Brockman's 1942 short story "Kaditcha".

[76] Mary was the younger sister of the younger sister of Elizabeth Durack, whose "Barrup" painting illustrates the beginning of this chapter. Its non Indigenous imagining of Indigeneity caused considerable controversy in 1996.

[77] Also known as Mudrooroo Narogin, Mudrooroo Nyoongah and Colin Johnson, Mudrooroo defends his Indigeneity in *The Indigenous Literature of Australia* (199-219), stating because of the colour of his skin, he has always been treated like an Aboriginal, and therefore regards himself to be one.

consciousness of being of the "Other": so much so that the Indigenous writer Ruby Langford Ginibi describes him at least as being a "spiritual brother" (225). Despite the kinship, Mudrooroo's stories leave the uneasy impression that Aboriginality, as Adam Shoemaker laconically notes, has been "plucked and stuffed" as a taxidermic specimen, in much the same vein as European authors documenting the "vanishing race" of the 1950s (*Mudrooroo: A Critical Study* 108).

Some texts can be read as an attempt to situate the self, as expressed through the narrative voice or significant protagonist, within the Australian landscape by the appropriation of a characteristic of the Other. As Lipsitz argues non-Indigenous Romanticism allows the non-Indigenous to appropriate without consideration of the factors – this thesis argues traumas – which limit Indigenous opportunities (120). Andrew Stubbs further extends the above ideas by maintaining that when we isolate an experience or focus on an object, the experience of the object is rendered outside of our spatio-temporal awareness to a point where it contains its own time and place. Often it is the time and place of the object or experience *in situ* which is craved, but which is ultimately denied. Another way of regarding the idea is in Merleau-Pontian terms: Merleau-Ponty argues place is structural, in that it is a component of the way one relates to the world (*The structure of behaviour* 107). The interstructural tension of being denied the *in situ* object or experience has phenomenological consequences, especially in terms of environmental psychology (Seamon "Phenomenological contribution"). The main protagonist in Patrick White's *Voss* suffers a psychosis where the desert becomes an hallucinatory landscape denying the "terrifying vision of conquering it" (Conti 30-31). Denial has nihilistic reverberations both individually and culturally, because to reject one's sense of being in the landscape is to reject the legitimacy of the self as well. According to Freud the ensuing failure of the project can breed melancholia as the self

becomes effaced ("Mourning and Melancholia"). Appropriation can also generate melancholia insofar as what cannot be possessed may be appropriated as if it is lost (Agamben 20). Anne Enderwitz, quotes Giorgio Agamben to argue melancholia arises as a response to make viable appropriation where "none is really possible" (Agamben 20). Freud's hypothetical cause of melancholia, the loss of a beloved object, shifts to the *unobtainability* of the beloved object. Melancholic desire leads to "narcissistic and appropriative gesture" in the attempt to resurrect the object in the self (Enderwitz 82). Symptomatic of problematic appropriation, particularly in relation to the landscape, self, and the desire to acquire the Other's power, is an ontological oscillation and nihilism. This is the White nation crisis that Brewster, quoting Wright (*Carpentaria* 57), maintains is characterised by a "constellation" of "unnaturally acclimatised rituals" ("Crisis of Whiteness" 93). Both Flanagan in *One Hand Clapping* and *Narrow Road,* and Wright in *Swan Book, Carpentaria,* and *Plains of Promise,* raise questions in their works concerning how non-Indigenous Australians define their Australianness. In the case of both authors, the vision is ultimately nihilistic.

Conclusion

The postcolonial concern of being of the landscape still resonates in the modern era. Anne Brewster argues much of the plot of Lucashenko's *Mullumbimby* focuses on Jo's gradual understanding of Ellen's "bodily connection" to Country as opposed to Twoboy's desire for documentation (Brewster "Mullumbimby" 250).

The equation between a paucity of spirit and a paucity in landscape's redeeming attributes continues. Louisa's lamentation of coming from a land of "nothing" implicitly correlates with her own perceived lack of feeling (Murray Bail *Homesickness* 293*)*. The "cowering" huts huddled together at Butler's Gorge "in this land of infinite space" mirror Maria Buloh's state of apprehension (Flanagan *One Hand Clapping* 4). While the

modern era has seen Indigenous literature flourish, especially the literature of memoir and retold history, it has also seen a continuation of some of the themes evident in colonial and postcolonial Australian literature, in particular the relationship between the non-Indigenous, Indigeneity and the landscape. With few exceptions, that relationship is described in nihilistic terms using oscillating ontologies that persist in Flanagan and Wright's novels, as will be demonstrated in the next chapter.

8: Flanagan and Wright's response to modern period magic nihilism

Introduction

The unreliability of landscape's ability to affirm one's being often leads to moments of horror in Flanagan and Wright's works. The interstice between history and fiction underscores that unreliability of being. Thus William Buelow Gould is described as having aliases to many of the other major characters in the afterword of *Gould's Book of Fish*, and the existence of major characters at the end of *Carpentaria* are at best problematic. These are not modernist or indeed postmodernist concerns, but rather post-Romantic, postcolonial attempts to portray being – that is, the experience of self - in a contested, violated and haunted landscape.

Wright, as quoted by Carole Ferrier asks "How do you mend the broken line - the effect of colonisation?" (44). One answer is to undermine certainty, particularly the certainty of the coloniser. History is constantly reworked, but literary works seldom are, imbuing them with a truthfulness that authoritative history finds difficult to possess (Gao 203). The process leads to the unreliability of discerning any objective truth from the chimera of heterogeneity affecting not only the portrayal of beings but of things, a characteristic of the magic nihilism historically extant in Australian literature. Indeed, Rebecca McNeer suggests a further "defining characteristic" of Australian literature is that its equivocal relationship to fact engenders a self-reflexivity that leads to "longevity and a certain legitimacy", exemplified by "phenomena of borrowing historical figures for fiction" which McNeer argues occurs throughout all periods of Australian literature ("What Might Be True" 70). William Slocombe maintains literature which is concerned with both liberation and paranoia is postmodern nihilism. Slocombe makes the

distinction between what he calls modernist "totalitarian" nihilism, and a postmodern "anti-totalitarian" nihilism (116-117). However, Slocombe's nihilism is personally affirming: "we are nothing but a sublime presence in the space of absence" (117). If the above two assertions are true, then there must exist the possibility of a self-reflexive persisting literature that nonetheless is capable of a self-affirming nihilism. Yet in both Flanagan and Wright, the conceptual self is often negated. The presence of being is described as one of negativity. Oblivia in *The Swan Book* has no agency. She is mute, possessed only of a memory created from what Bella Donna "has chosen to tell her" (89). The notion of self is called into question. Slocombe's proposition of affirming nihilism is not evidenced by protagonists such as Oblivia.

As canonical writers of the Australian modern period, both Flanagan and Wright clearly draw on some of the characteristics of modern era magic nihilism outlined in the previous chapter. Both writers are particular in their description of landscapes. Wright draws on an experience of Country outside of what Peter Minter calls "the extractive aesthetics of the capitalist Romantic sublime" in her novels but in doing so she proffers a landscape that is rich in life and movement (8). "The mind must be in harmony with the land," Buddy says in *Plains of Promise* (212). Wright's landscapes are often desolate or desolated, but they are still animate, often with cultural references to Indigenous lore. Wright argues that Indigenous cultural expression animates landscape: for example, it is only through the vibrancy of the popularised Aboriginal culture expressed in the Papunya Tula art works that central Australia is redeemed from being a wasteland to something "vital" ("The Politics of Art" 136). That the landscape is living, embraced and animate is made abundantly clear in Wright's essay "On Writing Carpentaria":

> What I saw was the mighty flow of an ancestral river rushing ... The river was flowing with so much force I felt it would never stop, and it would keep on

> flowing, just as it had flowed by generations of my ancestors, just as its waters would slip by here forever. It was like an animal, very much alive. (1)

Flanagan also sees an animate landscape, but he rarely confers on it the cultural and self-affirming attributes that Wright does. When he does so, it is more often than not in time frames other than the present. His landscapes are more "brooding" (*One Hand* 22), "terrifying" (*Wanting* 211) and "weird" (*Wanting* 172). As such, Flanagan's nihilism offers little or no redemption: characters are subsumed by the landscape they inhabit. Aljaz Cosini finds himself in a "gorge of death" because he has ignored the "language" of the landscape (*River Guide* 296-297).

Landscape and Indigeneity in Flanagan and Wright

Alexis Wright in an interview concerning *Carpentaria* and *Grog War*, sees redemptive and reconciliatory power in landscape:

> I think we need to think about where our hearts and minds have come from, and how they might live in this country. I think we're making the effort and we work very hard in what we do, and it'll be a good time to start talking about reconciliation from that level of where our spirits connect. ("Indigenous Dreamers Thwarted By Fear" n.pag.)

Devlin-Glass, reviewing *Carpentaria*, says the "genius of the Aboriginal sacred is its faithfulness to the highly specialized locality of the particular territory, and the deep interpenetration of the ethno-biological and geological with the sacred" (84). The presentation of potentially sacred landscape is at once redemptive (Wrights tells O'Brien that the question of how we all "live in this country" is "where spirits connect" n.pag.). Such potential sacrality is also damning. The miners in *Carpentaria* are sent "rolling down to hell" (417). Mead, discussing *Carpentaria*, writes:

> Alexis Wright's novel also reminds us, powerfully, of the subterranean forces at work within our region of the world, locally and globally, that include, side by side, violence and unsustainable exploitation the moral priority of development ideology,

> and the coexistence of ritual, magic, spirituality, and Indigenous knowledge. ("The geopolitical underground" 203)

Histories inscribe landscapes, and colonising histories inscribe landscapes in particular ways that seek to affirm colonising privilege and in so doing often distort or forget the colonised, and often undermine the very affirmations such histories seek. The historical exclusion of Indigenous memories angers Wright, who complains in "Breaking Taboos" that "I do not like the way … our histories have been smudged, distorted and hidden, or written for us" (n.pag.). Colonising re-inscription also leads to unreliability. The narrator in Flanagan's *Wanting* describes the "onion" that was the vice-regal mansion of Hobart Town" "The island's capacity to transform everything into unreliable memory even before it happened, or in spite of it never happening, was already apparent…" (107-9).

If nations are an expression of group identity then the erosion of individual identity has nationalistic implications, evident in the "Crisis of Whiteness" that both Flanagan and Wright interrogate (Brewster). Flanagan, in his essay on "Van Diemen's Land" in *Mr Gable* writes hopefully that Australians

> ... are not dispossessed Europeans, but a muddy wash of peoples who were made anew in the merge of an old pre-industrial, pre-modern European culture with an extraordinary natural world and a remarkable black culture. (208)

However, Flanagan is not optimistic. Dorrigo Evans in *Narrow Road* is described as "not typical of Australia", nor are his fellow prisoners of war, being "volunteers from the fringes …", implying their attributes are lacking in the national character (204). When Colonel Rexroth tells Dorrigo that "from Oxford to Oodnadatta they were all one people" (46) and that "we will triumph as Englishmen" (46) and that the "national character" (44) must be celebrated, Dorrigo cynically replies that he "never treated the national character" (44). Flanagan fears national character is in fact conformity, a

corrosive element that engenders what Flanagan calls "The Australian Disease":

> ... in present day Australia, it doesn't matter what you do or what you have done, as long as you conform to power. The only true crime in an ever more bland Australia is to not conform. And it is about the Australian disease of conformity that I want to speak tonight, and about how conformity deforms and destroys love and freedom. (5)

The cynicism concerning national identity extends to *The Unknown Terrorist*. The Doll – a realist who "embraces disappointment" has her thoughts punctuated by the inane blare of television and radio (9). An anthem is reduced to background noise: "The television was singing 'I still Call Australia Home', but Australia no longer felt like any sort of home to the Doll" (274).

Wright in many of her works, but especially *The Swan Book* subverts and parodies non-Indigenous ideas of national identity and asks more directly "What songs should be sung in recognition of our national collectivity?" ("On Writing *Carpentaria*" 14). Her cynical answer in *The Swan Book* is Country and Western, sung as Warren Finch's body is popped into the deep freeze of a "Fresh Food People" (296) truck called the "Spirit of the Nation" (296), and taken on a "See You Around" tour (298).

Throughout the history of Australian literature, the attempt to characterise Australianness by exploring history and environment through landscape and Indigeneity has led to a bleak view of nationality. Nationality – national identity – is an important part of Australian literature in that the very definitions of "Australian literature" all rely on the premise that it is a literature of location (Mead "Nation, literature, location"). The perception that the national psyche – the idea of Australianness - is underlain by horror and nihilism is common. As Harry Heseltine, in arguing that throughout Australian literary history there has been "sense of the horror of sheer existence", notes "… there [is]… an intimate connection between the nature of the Australian landscape

and the quality of the inner life" (45).

Geordie Williamson maintains that through such writing Australian literature "… could teach us to dwell more easily in a landscape that [does] not accord with the metaphors and myth-kitty that was our northern inheritance" (n.pag.). Williamson's hope – to dwell more easily in the Australian landscape - is necessarily disruptive. It is the exploration of that horizon just beyond the range and ken of White vision that is still a narrative force for both Flanagan and Wright. Both writers feature counter-narratives to the prevailing ones on Australianness: *Narrow Road* is a counter point to the ANZAC myth; *One Hand Clapping* a counterpoint to the Anglo-centric view of national identity and migration, and *Carpentaria* a counter-narrative to conventional views on Indigeneity (Pavlides 57, Molloy). The counter narratives have nationalistic implication. For example, Mozzie Fishman in *Carpentaria* leads his disciples into an underworld of the rainbow serpent that has a dream-like, almost nightmarish intensity (440-446). Wright's prose in this section is described by Philip Mead as "solemn" as it unfolds an ontology far removed from the Christian over-layerings which are first used to describe Mozzie ("The Geopolitical Underground" 201). Mead says such descriptions are symptomatic of the "deep ideological contests at work within the Australian nation" (203).

Counter narratives also imply an indistinction between fact and fable. Clifford Geertz argues that only within special circumstances, where a culture "actor" natively is of the same culture as that being observed can that culture be described as "natural fact" (*The Interpretation of Cultures* 15). In all other instances, such facts become "fictions" meaning not that they are "false" or "unfactual" but something "fashioned." "Natural fact" is the objectified reality of such a culture "actor." For all else, the distinction between "natural fact" and *fictio* becomes blurred (15). Flanagan and Wright extensively

employ the hybridisation of documented history and the imagined recreation of the past, a technique which simultaneously destabilizes and validates what one would assume to be a binary structuralism. The resulting "heteroglossic complexity of narrative" creates a constant flux of dialogic interpretation which both empowers and destabilizes both real and imagined histories (Hall "Writing Across Boundaries" 180).

The fictionalisation of history has two effects: the history being related becomes much more immediate to the reader, but at the price of it becoming much more unreliable. In fictionalising history, as Flanagan does in *Wanting* the authority of text, whether fiction or fact, is itself destabilised. The destabilisation creates a tension with the novel's use of historical record. Alexis Wright's *Grog War* melds a fictionalised family with factual record. In *Plains of Promise* and *Carpentaria*, Wright describes fictive histories with correlations to actual events[78]. A similar approach is claimed by Flanagan in *Narrow Road* in describing his recreation of Edward "Weary" Dunlop (Flanagan "Interview with Cameron Wilson" n.pag.). The destabilisations create a tension with the novels' own use of the historical record as source material. The resulting unreliability of either fiction or fact lead both author's writings into Indyk's "extraordinary degree of heterogeneity", characterised by objects, locations, beings and even weather contorting their shapes and mutating their identities under the emotional pressure of attempting to forge an Indigenous voice ("Pastoral and Priority" 849).

Moreover, the "fictocritical form of enunciation" described by Muecke, that is, the oscillation between fiction and fact creates a fabulation, that is a rupture of standard expectations of sequence, subject and style within a written work to fuse the quotidian

[78] Wright tells Stephen Moss how in "the 1930s her forebears were forced off their ancestral lands in Lawn Hill, closer to the Gulf, as white farmers enclosed huge ranches, and had to migrate south to an alien and exigent urban life" (n.pag.)

expectations with myth and nightmare (Muecke, "Cultural Studies" n.pag.). The effect can be magical, but often is horribly magical. For example, in *Gould's Book of Fish* an incident based on Péron's diary entry for January 13, 1802 is described:

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William Westall King George's Sound - View from Peak Head *(see Monteath and West-Sooby,* Encountering Terrra Australis *335) Westall, an artist trained to scientifically render the landscape was dissatisfied with what he saw: the work is a pastiche of other images: The grass is from Port Jackson. The tree lower left is a Eucalyptus from Spencer Gulf.*

an Indigenous woman screams when she believes Péron, in greeting her and removing his glove, is peeling off the skin of his hand (243).

Flanagan and Wright's ecological concerns

Ecological cataclysm - a landscape deleteriously scarred (by such agents as mining, logging or fire) through human agency – is a theme in both Flanagan and Wright's works. Consider this passage in *The Swan Book*:

> Bushfires came in walls across their path. As the grasslands burned, the swans flew high, sailing through winds gusting above the smoke … The swans, their strength crippled, breathed hot smoke-filled air, and the smell of their own singed feathers crawled into their lungs. … (323)

Flanagan's descriptions of fires are even more cataclysmic, often signalling an end to a world. Even *Death of a River Guide*, remembered more for its riparian setting than not, features an apocalyptic fire: Eileen, sheltering from the 1934 Richmond bushfire tells her charges the world is about to end (62). Harry investigates for himself "out in the cracking winds under the ash-black sky…" (62).

Fire is not the only human agency to modify landscape. Logging, mining, even clearing and over-grazing all can have devastating effects on the landscape. What many

modern Australians associate with the outback landscape – red-earth dust storms, weed infestation, arboreal absence, all have an element of European creation. Alexis Wright alludes to this in her essay "On Writing Carpentaria" when she writes:

> He pointed to the weeds growing profusely over the banks – burrs, prickles and other noxious introduced plants grew everywhere ... Tangling invasive vines grew here and there, smothering the slender young trees that are Indigenous to this savannah-zoned country. (1)

Wright's wildernesses not only "challenge European hubris and ecological ignorance" but draw attention to the way the perception of landscape reflects ourselves (Devlin-Glass, "Alexis Wright's *Carpentaria"* 83).

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Rover Thomas 1926–1998, Australia Cyclone Tracy 1991, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra.

Both Wright and Flanagan interrogate the palimpsests of landscape, the re-inscriptions due to pre-colonial, colonial and postcolonial endeavours that never entirely erase the previous surfaces. Indeed, Francoise Kral argues the violence inherent in the act of resurfacing is a characteristic that imbues Wright's *Plains of Promise*: the superimposed layers of landscape in Plains of Promise, Kral argues, has origins traceable to Mudrooroo's works *The Undying* and *Dr Wooreddy*, laying the foundation for an "Aboriginal aesthetic" (14), an aesthetic which despite Kral's thesis also pervades Flanagan's landscapes, and the fear, expressed in some of his novels, of being "written out of history" (14, 8). Wright's first major work, *Grog War*, describes a (principally rural urban) landscape that is inscribed over traditional country, and a community attempting to reinscribe its

presence in the landscape. The landscape, once the domain of "old people" - spiritual ancestors of the Warumungu who now inhabit the hills around Tennant Creek, is circumscribed by the shards of glass bottles which create a wasteland not without its own attractions:

> They went up to a bit of a wasteland where decades of beer bottles had been smashed into millions of tiny bits of green and gold coloured weathered pieces that looked like shiny stones when hit by the sun. (209-210)

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Erosion of the Lunette dune at Mungo National Park. The erosion started with sheep grazing in the latter half of the nineteenth century. Like many of Australia's "natural" features such as landscape gullies and dust storms the "natural" beauty of Mungo is a product of human agency. Photo: Jamie Derkenne

Similar descriptions, that is, descriptions of landscapes effused with the flotsam and jetsam of human activity, are found throughout Wright's works, especially in *The Swan Book* and *Carpentaria*. These landscapes are re-inscribed by human activity. In her essay "Deep Weather" Wright explicitly equates the Rainbow Serpent with theological law, drawing a distinct relationship between Nature and Indigenous belief. "[S]tories tie us to the land as guardians and caretakers and the land to us as the most powerful source of law" (74).

Wright argues all Australians should give more credence to such laws than those promulgated through courts and parliaments. Wright maintains the interaction between Indigenous people, land and such "customary" law is exemplified by such events as the dream concerning Cyclone Tracy (the cyclone that destroyed Darwin in 1974) experienced by the artist Rover Thomas and the subsequent development of the *Gurrir Gurrir* ceremony in which the Rainbow Serpent manifests as the cyclone (82).

Flanagan and Wright's respective ecological concerns propose a direct link between the landscape and the communities and individuals who inhabit them. Flanagan's opinion and reportage pieces on Gunns, a controversial wood-chip and wood-pulp company which Flanagan extensively criticises in articles such as "Cargo Cult", Tasmanian forestry management practice and natural disasters like the Victorian bushfires of 2008, as well as his early work, *A Terrible Beauty,* show an author aware of and troubled by a perceived societal lack of regard to landscape. In an interview with Cameron Wilson, Flanagan says "landscape gives us a measure of all things man-made" (n.pag.). He proposes in *A Terrible Beauty* that landscape actually informs moral stance. The environment of south west Tasmania was seen as both generative and affirming of the cruelty and suffering imposed on convicts (20-24). The deistic potentiality of such landscapes underpins an ecological philosophy, an ontology of landscape.

Both Flanagan and Wright go beyond what Carolyn Merchant believes to be the major ecological concern of recent literature, namely the "grand narrative of environmental endism" in that their works feature an endism that is more a reflection of societal psychosis borne out of a lack of regard to landscape (163). If we fail to situate ourselves within the landscape, then its only function must be disposably utilitarian. Wright makes the point in *Carpentaria* when the Mayor of Desperance, Bruiser, muses that "If you can't use it, eat it or fuck it, then it's no bloody use to you" (35). Germaine Greer, in *White Beech*, a book on her attempts to revive degraded farmland, writes extensively on both the wilful and unintentional destruction of the environment. Her vision of Australia is one where land is protected only "when it is unsuitable for any kind of exploitation" (340). The land is very much the victim, like many of the Aboriginal women in Desperance, of Bruiser rapaciousness:

> Everywhere I had ever travelled across ... [Australia's] vast expanse I had seen devastation, denuded hills, eroded slopes, weeds from all over the world, feral

animals, open-cut mines as big as cities, salt rivers, salt earth, abandoned townships, whole beaches made of beer cans. (*White Beech* 3)

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The Mistake Creek Massacre by Queenie McKenzie 1997 is one of a series of like-titled paintings depicting local recollections of a contentiously 1915 massacre carried out by black troopers under white supervision. The painting was purchased by the National Museum of Australia in 2005 for $30,000. It was rejected by the Museum Council in 2006 for being "historically inaccurate." It was re-accepted in 2013 on the grounds of cultural significance but not historical accuracy. (Daley 2013)

Wright's landscape, though evidently still potent with spirituality, shares many of the features lamented by Greer. Even the sea in *Carpentaria* - capable of inundating the land on such a scale as to wash away most traces of settlement, an idea first developed by Herbert in *Capricornia,* is floored with garbage:

> He could have stayed many fathoms down on the basement of the ocean floor amongst the remains of ancient shipwrecks, lost forever in the tranquil music of thousands of bits and pieces of chipped and broken china - sugar bears, yellow chickens, spotted dogs and pink babies of lost cargo... (*Carpentaria* 61)

Carpentaria's eco-apocalypse is the destruction of the local mine by Will Phantom, a warrior who is arguably a fictionalisation of Murrandoo Yanner[79]. In describing this cataclysm, Wright describes not only a degraded landscape, but a bleak state of being for the Prickle Bush, Downtown and Uptown mobs. At one point in *Carpentaria* Will finds himself, perhaps in a hallucinatory state, on a huge raft made of rubbish (490). The Downtown mob are described as living in abandoned car bodies and cobbled bits of tin, through which weeds grow in profusion. The rubbish is that of the coloniser. There is a correlation between the three groups' state of being, their interrelationships, and the landscape they dwell in. In the description of that correlation, much of the

[79] Murrandoo Yanner was the defendant in a case where it was alleged he took and ate protected fauna (crocodiles). The case led to a subsequent High Court decision (see *Yanner v Eaton*) affecting the enjoyment of traditional indigenous rights and the ability of the States and Commonwealth to impinge on them (through, for example, the promulgation of pro-mining legislation on Native Title), In an interview with Kerry O'Brien Wright names Yanna as someone with whom she shares "the same heartbeat" (*7:30 Report*, June 21, 2007 n.pag.).

contending ontologies in Wright's works reside.

Wright's perception of landscape is interactive: her construal of the world comes about through the interaction between landscape and the means available by which that landscape can be internally represented. The external representation of that internal reality through the written word interrogates, therefore, not a set of objects which make any absolute reality but the interaction between those objects, as external stimuli, and the means via language available to internally represent them.

Wright mocks the non-Indigenous idea of wilderness in *Carpentaria* and *The Swan Book*. Landscapes degraded by both non-Indigenous and Indigenous agency feature prominently: swamps full of garbage, cities drowning in pollution, and seas choked with refuse. Even Wright's desert glistens with shards of glass (*Grog War* 210). Both *The Swan Book* and *Carpentaria* feature the annihilation of landscape via a cataclysmic *Sturm und Drang*. The dichotomy between degradation of the landscape and what it should represent negates a linkage to being. *The Swan Book* and *Carpentaria* show human agency on the landscape, yet in *Croie en l'incroyable* Wright directly sees landscape as "... the source of our laws, our language, our culture and our responsibilities" (12).[80] Given that Wright's landscapes are almost universally degraded, the correlation clearly has nihilistic potential. Wright is sensitised to taboos concerning how "this country generally views itself in its relationship with Aboriginal people" the idea of the Indigenous "getting on and getting by" is a taboo which must be broken ("Breaking Taboos" n.pag.). One of the challenges facing Indigenous authors, it seems, is to overcome a historicity of ultimately racist ideas that almost unconsciously inform

[80] The original reads: "Cette géographie millénaire est la source de nos lois, nos langues, notre culture et nos responsabilités." The translation is by the author.

current non-Indigenous debate. Australia's historicity includes notions of peaceful colonisation and benevolent paternalism towards the Indigenous (Nacci 200-201).

Wright's Indigenous characters move with ease through landscapes which can be initially read as wildernesses, but are nonetheless nurturing environments: Will Phantom, in *Carpentaria*, has no problem surviving in the landscape. Wright's true wildernesses are in Oblivia's isolation and search for meaning in the city from which she longs to escape in *The Swan Book* or in the vast raft of rubbish that Will Phantom finds himself living on in *Carpentaria*.

Indigenous memoir and history in Flanagan and Wright

Flanagan often incorporates historical events and sources regarding Tasmania's Indigenous peoples in his novels, particularly in *River Guide*, *Wanting* and *Book of Fish*. He does so in ways which although ostensibly Modernist, solemnly recount the horrors Tasmania's Aboriginal population endured. An example is Flanagan's treatment of the historical figure of George Augustus Robinson, a self-schooled builder and preacher who while residing in Tasmania was responsible for rounding up the survivors of the Black War *circa* 1825 to 1832. Flanagan has drawn principally on N.J.B. Plomley's publication of Robinson's journals and papers, *Friendly Mission*, as well as Plomley's account of the Flinders Island settlement, *Weep in Silence*.

George Augustus Robinson is a minor protagonist in both *Wanting* and *Book of Fish*. In *Book of Fish* "Guster" Robinson, the "white conciliator" (215) is introduced as an "improbable and foppish Moses of the South Seas" (216). Through his introduction, the narrator is able to explain the Palawa "by their own account…were a free & noble people" who are nonetheless pissed upon by convicts "to prove the superiority of an imprisoned white man over an exiled black man" (216). Moreover, through Robinson, Gould meets Twopenny Sal, who he finds later dancing around King Canute's funeral

pyre. As Gould approaches, he feels "something fall upon my shoulder then drop away". It is "a smouldering black hand" (328). In the following few pages the narration becomes hallucinatory, with Gould realising the register papers Two Penny Sal is throwing into the fire contain his own narration, that he is "entrapped in a book" (336). Gould's "inconsolable memory" is obliterated by the flames of Indigenous tragedy (336).

Flanagan uses Robinson's journals as a primary source. For example, the colonised theology, whereby the Palawa believe they get reborn as Englishmen is based on Robinson's own account of an almost identical conversation (*Book of Fish* 340, Plomley 64). In so doing Flanagan adds verisimilitude to his account of historical Indigenous trauma but he does so in a way that focuses attention on the disintegrating being of Billy Gould. The focalisation is on Gould, not to any large extent on Two Penny Sal or Towtereh. A similar situation occurs in *Wanting*. A major part of the novel chronicles Mathinna's life, but she is at times also reflective of non-Indigenous angst, especially that of Sir John. When Mathinna's ever more complex interpretations of the quadrille transmogrify into the Kangaroo Dance her world falls apart. Sir John is "thrilled no more" (152). As Lady Franklin and Sir John begin the discussion that leads to Mathinna's abandonment Sir John realises "in this endless world that teemed with so much life, so much love, with so many things, …he was alone" (174). Indigeneity in the above two instances is used to a degree as a metonym for the character dissolution of White protagonists. Indigeneity is only imagined through a White optic, and is in that imagining associated with an existential nihilism.

Wright also employs history in her work, but in a completely different way to Flanagan. In *Plains of Promise*, a fictive account of some of the issues raised in the *Bringing Them Home Report* of 1997, she makes it quite clear that the history she recounts is not

the pastoralist history of White imagining but is nonetheless a legitimate and at times personal history (Pavlides 142-143). As in *Grog War*, the interlocutions of the narrator explaining the nature of that history give *Plains of Promise* occasional moments of almost journalistic prose, for example the description of the mission buildings (11). Wright is not using history and memoir to make some metaphysical point concerning her protagonists, she is using it to explain *this is the way things are*. Thus in *Carpentaria* Uncle Mickey has lived "God knows how long" collecting evidence in the form of bullet shells, maps, names and a "great archive of cassettes which he left for the war trials he predicted would happen one day" (11). As the narrator notes, "this was not vaudeville. Wars were fought here. If you had your patch destroyed you'd be screaming too" (11). The nihilistic experiences of Wright's protagonists are ultimately brought about through non-Indigenous agency.

Aboriginal Reality in Flanagan and Wright

The nihilism found in Flanagan and Wright's works suggest that the ontological oscillation found in their works is not postcolonial magic realism, but another style of writing altogether. Some for example Haylock, and Shoemaker in "Waiting to be surprised", liken Alexis Wright's work to Mudrooroo's Maban reality while others such as Jeanine Leane, and Alison Ravenscroft in "Carpentaria" say her work encompasses an Aboriginal ontology from which non-Aboriginal readers may *infer* a magic realism. Whether Maban reality or Aboriginal (magic) realism, such labels do little to differentiate Wright's work from the Latin American writers she admires. Yet a degree of the ontological unfamiliarity and oscillation in her works also has to do with the fact that writing from an Indigenous perspective Wright reaches into cultural knowledge systems often left unexplained, making her work at times difficult for non-Indigenous readers to access. Anne Brewster ("Indigenous Sovereignty") and Alison Ravenscroft

("What Falls From View") believe such inaccessibility and narrative strangeness force non-Indigenous readers to reconsider Indigeneity, as well as their relationship to it. Moreover, as Frances Devlin-Glass points out, the term magic realism has the potential to trivialise Indigenous spirituality, evidenced in Wright's narrator's descriptions of landscape spirits and the Rainbow Serpent, by implying it signifies a lower form of religion ("A Politics Of The Dreamtime" 395). A difficulty in approaching Wright's work is clearly delineating between such spirituality, which Devlin-Glass contends can be misread as magic realism, and other stylistic instances in Wright's writing, as for example, the description of a mermaid "locked in wood" in a hotel bar (*Carpentaria* 469).

Flanagan has been described as a writer who has suffered from being seen as an appropriator of Aboriginal culture and spirituality to enhance his "magic realism". (Delrez "Nationalism"). It is a difficult issue for a non-Indigenous writer. How does one describe, as Flanagan does in *Wanting* and *Gould's Book of Fish*, Indigenous viewpoints whose historical fragility results from non-Indigenous agency? Further complicating such mooted ethical concerns is Flanagan's view, *circa* 1995, that Tasmanian Indigeneity has been "submerged" into the Tasmanian working class: "many people have got that [Aboriginal] blood in them" (Hugo 2013 n.pag.). In talking of "story cycles" and oral traditions Flanagan in an interview with Cameron Wilson hints at the contentious socio-economic and supressed Indigeneity[81] that Les Murray also claims in *The Vernacular Republic* (Hugo n.pag, Huggan 80-81). Lukashenko explains to Anne Brewster. "In working-class and underclass Australia, Aboriginality is much better understood than it is in the middle class" (*Giving this Country* 119). Nonetheless, the presumption that Indigeneity can be comprehended by Flanagan draws criticism,

[81] "Could it be", writes Flanagan, "that in the merge of Aboriginal and convict cultures that occurred in Tasmania something else came into being, neither European nor Aboriginal, but something different in its own terms? And is it possible that the indigenous people of Tasmania are unique in ways not accurately described by the word Aborigine, that are mocked by the word black?" ("Tension in Tasmania" n.pag.)

particularly from Karen Barker. Delrez "redeems" *Death of a River Guide* by pointing to its references to the works of Italo Svevo, a pseudonym for Aron Ettore Schmit), placing it within a more "European cultural inheritance" ("Nationalism" 120, 117).

However, indigenous story telling techniques, indigeneity, and European cultural inheritance – the ingredients of postcolonial magic realism - only go some way to explain Flanagan and Wright's works. Their nihilist ontologies also result from colliding worlds, ecological despair, equivocation as to what constitutes the self - and the lack of cultural certitude in such notions as national history and national identity.

Appropriation of Indigeneity is so pervasive in Australian cultural practice that the melancholic horror of many Australian texts can be seen to be a result of the practice (Gelder "Australian Gothic"). As previously noted Enderwitz claims melancholia can arise when something is desired, but cannot be attained. From both Indigenous and non-Indigenous viewpoints, the Other has things such as spiritual affinity with landscape on the one hand, economic and political power on the other, that are desired, but are unobtainable. This leads to a non-Indigenous expectation that Indigenous cultural expression should be done in ways that limit Indigeneity to an authentic past, a process of subtle preferencing of an inauthentic imagined Indigeneity over the real thing. Alexis Wright strongly criticizes the process by stating "[They] demand authenticity from us but have yet to come to terms with their own place in this land" ("The Politics Of Art" 134)[82]. Wright's criticism has literary application. Belinda

[82] A further point to be noted is that although such work speaks of "cultural difference" its popularity could well be in part due to its aesthetic familiarity. As Quentin Sprague notes, "a thread that has run through much remotely produced Aboriginal art has been its visual resonance with late-modernist painting" (33). The effect of such visual resonance is potentially troubling: it suggests Aboriginal art is by its otherness a marker of white culture. "In other words, Aboriginal art is used to define 'whiteness' through its role as a souvenir", as Marcia Langton writes of [what white culture perceives to be] "the lowest levels of human evolution" (83). The interplay between Indigenous expression and the European expectation of Indigenous expression is so profound that it, as Eric Michaels points out results in a critical stochasis (162). Why is it, Michaels asks "that almost nothing of this work is ever designated 'bad' - a lacuna that would not see to make it easy to sell anything especially good, either" (143)

Wheeler points out that editorial control over many Indigenous texts has so distorted the original intent that the text may as well be non-Indigenous (8). Australian angst over the Indigenous heritage or otherwise of authors imagining Indigeneity is well known. Sreten Božić, writing as Banumbir Wongar, was reviewed favourably in 1972 by the *New York Times Book Review* for his *The Track to Bralgu*. Sreten Božić described himself in *The Track to Bralgu* as "part Aborigine" (endpapers). The reviewer, Thomas Keneally, called the stories "brilliant" ("The soul of things" 14) but Božić is nonetheless dismissed by Wright because of the pretension ("The Politics Of Art" 136).

Wright also notes appropriation is often by the non-Indigenous taking "even our identity as their own" ("The Politics Of Art" 136). Wright cites Marlo Morgan in *Mutant Messenger Down Under*, Wanda Koolmatrie, the pseudonym of Leon Carmen who was at the centre of the Magabala Books *My Own Sweet Time* controversy, and Ray Beamish, who claimed to have painted works previously attributed to Kathleen Petyarre. These appropriations, Wright believes, allow their perpetrators to use Indigeneity "as a backdrop in representing themselves" (136). Anne Brewster quotes Jeanine Leane observing critical methodologies which often revolve "largely around interrogating and 'defining' Aboriginality without questioning and critiquing "whiteness" and the values and cultural codes associated" with it (Brewster *Giving This Country* XVI). The appropriation of Indigeneity, and even the regard for it as something Other necessarily implicitly involves contextualisation from a non-Indigenous standpoint. In representing the Other, the Master represents the self.

Conclusion

Wright and Flanagan not only demonstrate that modern era issues concerning history, Indigeneity and ecology are still worthy of interrogation, but also demonstrate the complexities involved in portraying such issues. Both authors are interested in

portraying Indigenous realities, but Flanagan's attempts have been confounded by placing Indigenous concerns in a different time. The implications and complexities of imagining an Indigeneity are articulated clearly by Wright, but in so doing she writes passages that have the same nihilistic potential, the same unfulfilledness of being, as Flanagan. Both authors, for entirely different reasons, resort to an oscillation between differing ontologies: Indigenous versus non-Indigenous and fact versus imagination. The process by which major protagonists contain those competing ontologies leads to melancholia because of the failure to situate self, landscape and history within a desired affirming landscape. Both Flanagan and Wright's writing have political and nationalist implications, which are made evident even in their works which do not resort to descriptions of magic, as will be discussed in the next chapter.

9: Conclusions

Introduction

The concerns raised in Flanagan and Wright's novels are the concerns that have been described in Australian literature since the colonial period. Both authors explore what is it to be Australian: what histories and mythologies that nomenclature involves, and how being and landscape are intertwined. In doing so both authors are part of a continuum of Australian literature which exhibits both nihilism and ontological uncertainty. Even in the novels that arguably fall outside the characteristics of magic nihilism, Flanagan and Wright still examine nihilism, nihilist environments and ontological anxiousness.

Despite their different approaches, Flanagan and Wright have three points of similarity. First, both are landscape writers. Flanagan and Wright portray landscapes as important elements in their works, elements that are capable of interacting with protagonists and affecting their agencies and outcomes. Flanagan and Wright imbue landscapes with character, emotion and capacity to haunt. Second, both authors examine the relationship between non-Indigenous and Indigenous Australians. The complexities of that relationship are explored extensively by Wright, but Flanagan also makes it a central point of novels such as *Wanting* and *Death Of A River Guide*. Third, both authors raise questions concerning what it means to be a self-conscious entity. What forms the sense of self and how is that sense modulated by factors such as history and environment? The answers both authors give are uncertain and nihilist. Both authors have written works that fall outside the arguments in this thesis equating landscape, contested ontology and Indigeneity, but even those works display nihilistic and sometimes ontologically contentious themes.

Flanagan and Wright's political stances

Both Flanagan and Wright have made their political standpoints clear in essays and articles. Those views are also evident in their novels. Wright was the coordinator of a conference held in Tennant Creek in August 1993 on Aboriginal self-government. She told the *Canberra Times* Aboriginals believed "they must present a united voice on constitutional change, and the place of the Aboriginal people in the Australia of the future" nominating 2001 as a "pivotal date" ("Self-government focus of talks" 5). Wright's reasoning is clear: "Aboriginal leaders, as all Indigenous people in this country, have been shaped by a history of more than two centuries of political domination, theft of land, and widespread suffering" ("Embracing the Indigenous Vision" 105). The "place of the Aboriginal people in the Australia of the future" is still very much with her 2013 *The Swan Book*, which has numerous references to political issues affecting Indigenous people. The narrator of *The Swan Book* describes "A security fence of government transparency erected by the Army around the entire swamp" (32). "The Army was being used in this country to intervene and control the will, mind and soul of the Aboriginal people" (47). "These were past times for kicking Aboriginal people around the head with more interventionist policies that were charmingly called, *Closing the Gap*" (49). Even though the society she imagines has Warren Finch as the "Deputy President of the Government of Australia" the swamp elders, the "old people" believe the only way they can respond is die (117). "They said they would be better off dead. *More powerful.* They would telepathically stream their stories forever through any time of the day they said: *We will haunt Australia good and proper*…" (117). The irony also suggests there is a disjuncture between being Indigenous and being Australian. Aboriginal Elders who insist Warren Finch's "spirit is gone now. Up in Country" are told to stop being un-Australian (287). Even the talking snow monkey, Rigoletto in *The Swan Book*, "simply did not like Australia" (250). Australianness leads to imperceptivity. In *Carpentaria* the

Pricklebush mob believe "Invisible things in nature made no sense to Uptown because of their *savoir faire* in being Australians" (78).

Apart from his conservation writing (for example, his militant stance in "I don't agree") Flanagan makes his political views explicitly clear in interviews and talks such as his closing address to the Melbourne Writers' Festival in 2001, a speech that was printed as *The Australian Disease on the Decline of Love and the rise of Non-Freedom*, in 2015. "The only true crime in an ever bland Australia is to not conform" (5). Flanagan descries the "corrosion of …truth" (40), "the desire…to retreat into a past" (49) and the "collapse…of empathy" (50) as being symptomatic of the disease he diagnoses. The only solution he sees is the possibility that freedom "is finally a form of love" (54). In *Mr Gable* Flanagan further asserts "We have possibilities in Australia with our unique land, with our indigenous people, with our own particular response to our world, that suggest our future might still be worth dreaming" (212). Love, a "dreaming" of sorts and an acknowledgement of "unique land" and "indigenous people" suggests that Flanagan has a Romanticised view of the themes in his writing (212). Flanagan's implied view that love redeems the protagonists in his novels is worth examining: Aljaz's relationship with Couta has been fractured by the death of their daughter in *River Guide*. Lady Franklin abandons Mathinna to an uncertain fate in *Wanting*. Bojan and Sonja have cast the word love from their minds in *One Hand*. Dorrigo walks past Amy on the Harbour Bridge "without a word" in *Narrow Road* (412). "He had got it wrong. Her, him, them, love – especially love – so completely wrong" (412). All the above protagonists find themselves in nihilist circumstances. If love is the redeeming virtue that ameliorates that nihilism, they are particularly dispossessed of it. Flanagan is quoted by Amelia Lester as saying *Narrow Road* is "a strange story that isn't readily absorbed into any nation's dreams" (n.pag.). His project in his novels, and hence his political

stance may be better described as attempting to have those strange stories absorbed into the national psyche, just as Alexis Wright wants her stories of Indigenous identity to be absorbed as well.

Exceptions to the rule

Two novels by Flanagan and one text by Wright arguably go beyond the boundaries of Australian magical nihilism. These are Flanagan's *The Unknown Terrorist* and *The Narrow Road To The Deep North* and Wright's *Grog War*. Notwithstanding their lack of positing competing unresolvable ontologies experienced by a main protagonist, all three works in quite different ways portray nihilist realities that are devoid of redemption or hope. In doing so, it is interesting that both Flanagan, in *Unknown Terrorist* and Wright in *Grog War*, utilise journalistic writing styles to describe those realities. Journalism is a style of writing and research that allows the reader ready access to "the truth about fact" (American Press Institute n.pag.). The replication of some of its stylistic devices in both works suggests both authors are keen to describe an underlying veracity.

Unknown Terrorist is the only work by Flanagan that is set entirely in an urban environment, and the only one that is also entirely set in the present. The writing lacks the Baroque playfulness of novels such as *Book of Fish* and *Wanting*, relying instead on journalistic methods of story-telling, including short paragraphing, the use of short sentences to punctuate longer ones, chronological narration, and the referencing of protagonists by their full name. As such, the novel lacks practically all the magical elements of Flanagan's other fiction. In *Unknown Terrorist*, a story (Flanagan tells us in his "A note on sources") loosely based on Heinrich Böll's novel *The Lost Honour of Katharina Blum*, the main character is a twenty-six-year-old woman known as the Doll, who has a one-night stand with a mysterious and handsome stranger, Tariq. As a result

of mistaken identity, The Doll finds herself being hunted by the authorities, thinking she is a terrorist planning to set off a bomb in downtown Sydney. There is no magic in this novel, but there is certainly nihilism. Shuddering with grief for her dead son the Doll realises "There is no why… There is just *is*. (273)" The novel opens with the statement "The idea that love is not enough is a particularly painful one" (1). The narrator continues, "Nietzsche's philosophy could not even explain Nietzsche, a man who sacrificed his life for a horse" (2).

Wilder, the Doll's best friend, urges her to turn herself in and to trust that "in Australia things always get sorted out in the end," but the Doll is convinced that her story won't be believed (250). She has long ago come to the conclusion "the world ran on ... lies and deceptions" (47). The Doll soon descends into a brutish and selfish Hobbesian world devoid of any beauty or grace. The novel ends with abject nihilism: a Chinese man trapped with eleven others in a shipping container taps on its side for help one last time. The tapping is not heard by a man on his yacht "trying to think of little else other than how chill, how sweet will be his first beer when he gets home" (317). The Doll dies, literally in a shoot-out. She finds herself once more with Tariq and her son Liam, but instantly realises this to be an illusion. "In her final moment she realised … there was no redemption, no resurrection" (312).

Narrow Road explicitly links its nihilism to memory through the retelling of Arch Flanagan's war-time experience (Flanagan "Freeing my father"). The reader is told at the beginning "A happy man has no past, while an unhappy man has nothing else" (*Narrow Road* 3). Soon after there is the musing "Horror just is. And while it reigns, it is as if there is nothing in the universe that it is not" (23). The nihilism is unrelenting. Darky Gardiner, about to be decapitated by an insane Japanese officer, understands

> …that all this would go on, and of him nothing would remain, that even his memory, though held by a few family and friends for a few years, perhaps decades, would ultimately be forgotten and mean no more than a fallen bamboo and the inescapable mud. (259)

Dorrigo Evans, musing that he is in a Dantean hell (232, 385) grasps the truth of a "terrifying world in which he could not escape horror, in which violence was eternal, the great and only verity…" (294). The landscape and its elements, "dark" (188), "shitty" (189), "sick" (213), "shuddering" like a man's beating heart plucked from his body or an earthquake (358) mirrors the despair of the protagonists. Only Jimmy Bigelow, a POW survivor who does not take himself seriously and believes the world to be "essentially comic" finds pleasure in landscape because he forgets his wartime experiences (431). "Thereafter he took great pleasure in wind, in the sound of rain. He marvelled at the feeling of dawn on a hot day" (433).

Grog War is also a work that falls outside the boundaries of magic nihilism. *Grog War* is a "factual account" of how the Warumungu people and the Julalikari Council fought a six-year battle from 1990 with local publicans to implement restrictions on alcohol sales across the entire Tennant Creek community (ix). Much of the narration centres on the Supreme Court and Liquor Commission hearing that was held in Darwin in 1995.

The book is framed as journalism, chiefly comprised of attributed quotes, a chronologically linear narration, citations, appendices, and lengthy quotes from relevant legislation. The reader is further invited to believe this to be a journalistic piece as the writing is interspersed with attributed extracts from newspaper articles, principally from the *Tennant and District Times*. The extracts are often presented as breakouts that suggest an approximation of the fonts, leading and em-spacing of the original article as in the breakout "Tough New Pub Laws" (84).

Even so, it is difficult to describe the text as journalism, even New Journalism. The text is heavily editorialised. The narrator's thoughts and emotions are made clear throughout, but the personal pronoun used is "you", not the anticipated "I". Describing what it would be like to be a bartender when a Northern Australia bar is filled to capacity, the narrator writes "your ears ring" "you" try "to keep a mental picture", "you" feel "pissed off", "you have no time to talk" (85). The personal pronoun is not meant to indicate the experience of the narrator: it is explicitly that of the bartender. "As soon as you have saved up enough cash you'll get the hell out. Or you do it for the grog" (85).

Moreover, *Grog War* is framed by two fictional stories. Wright explains that the stories are from town camp people who spoke to her about the impact alcohol was having on their lives. They told her "I should use their stories in a fictional way because they preferred not to be identified in the book" explaining that "Tennant Creek is a small town" (ix). The first of these stories, "Lucas" describes the alcohol-fuelled domestic violence between Lucas and his wife Devine. He sits in the middle of the main road, hoping the gesture will earn him a beer. The gesture annoys some drivers, including a young "surfie-type" driving a panel van (14). Later, Lucas stabs Devine in retribution for being hit by her with a crowbar. Drinking and waiting for the police to arrive Lucas sees "at least six pairs of the red eyes slitted and glowing from the driver's seat" of the panel van (21). He is hit by the van, and drifts off into unconsciousness "truly invisible to the world around him" (21).

Towards the end of the book, a story called "Devine" is told. It is 1992. Devine's dogs have been killed while she has been sheltering in town because of a "KKK scare" (203). All the tin huts "have been ransacked and torched" and fear makes her "sick in the stomach" (205). Her son Dwayne has to drive past "a group of white

louts" who he says "might be them" (205). Devine and her sons return to town where Devine spends her time sitting in an empty front bar. The two youngest children, Garth and Lacy "set about winding each other up with all of the items in their life that made them angry …. Family members. School. Friends. White people. Shop owners. Cops. Nothing to do. Having no money. Having nothing" (209). They end up breaking into the bowling club. Garth serves the boys drinks, initially soft drinks but soon enough trying the "hard stuff" (210). When the police finally take them away, Devine and her sister Holly fight, and Devine is hit by a police baton. Dwayne falls into an alcoholic stupor. Alistair is on the run. Garth, Lacy and Devine are incarcerated in Darwin. Dwayne tries to commit suicide, "it is only a matter of time" (217). The only hope in this nihilist story is contained in the bland advice of the narrator "There are support mechanisms in the Aboriginal community to help people like Dwayne and his family" (217).

Despite the fictionalisation of Lucas, Devine and their children, *Grog War* is clearly not a work of fiction, but does share some important elements with her fictional works. The first of these is the notion that the Aboriginal community at Tennant Creek share their lives with a spirit world. In the rocky hills surrounding the outskirts of Tennant Creek live the "old people" (4). These "spirit ancestors" come into town and chase the living "whenever they are upset" (4). The spirits have physical agency "Yungkuna (ghosts) are everywhere in the bush." "You can see their footprints" (4). Devine remembers her dogs as being "like a group of noisy bush spirits" (203).

The second is that culture imbued in the landscape also has direct agency of their lives. When ground is broken without permission "many Aboriginal people die" (4). When one of the pebbles from a sacred site is moved, "many Aboriginal children were bitten by snakes" (4). The description of the landscape itself is conflicted: on the

one hand the boys go to a wasteland where bottles are "smashed into millions of tiny bits of green and gold coloured weathered pieces that looked like shiny stones" (210). On the other, looking at the night sky, one could imagine reaching "up to heaven" (3). Indeed, the landscape holds Romantic rapture: "and the leaves of the konkleberry and wild orange glow from the moon ... The light from so far away strikes the trunks of bloodwood and turpentine to find the soft hues of grey and white and brown" (3).

The third point of similarity is the way Wright uses language. Tenses change dramatically, often from the past perfect to the present and back again, approximating the standard use of past tense in Aboriginal English: "Devine had forgotten her stiff leg and ... returned in time to meet Holly trying to pull Lacy who is nearly choking" (215). Wright also employs Dylanesque turns of phrase which gives her prose an unusual and potentially poetic character. Describing a courtroom interlude, she writes "Some time of silence passed" (148). Lucas sits at a bar having a "quiet beer with the cards of his memory" (11).

Conclusion

Arthur Phillips in *The Australian Tradition* draws on Barbara Baynton's work to portray a singular characteristic of Australian fiction:

> …a sense of spiritual darkness emanating from the land itself, a feeling of primeval cruelty fed by the sunlight which glares instead of glowing, by the sombre grey of the bush which some obstinate Europeanism within us insists should be green, by the brown weight of the plains, by the harshness of man's struggle against nature. (81)

This characteristic, Phillips writes, "touches Australian writing again and again" and is in part caused by "the guilty sense that man has forced his will upon the earth" (81). Although the above comments were made in 1966, Phillips' observation can be validly applied to Flanagan's and Wright's works, and indeed a partial description, as discussed

at the conclusion of Chapter 3, of magic nihilism itself. There have been shifts in how Australian literature has responded to landscape. Susanne Braun-Bau proposes a three stage development. In the first, the landscape, foreign and inhuman, evokes a *horror vacui*. In the second, the landscape offers transcendental experiences when "indifferent nature" becomes hostile because of an inadequate state of mind. In the third, the depiction of consciousness dominates, with a focus on "mental or magic landscapes," turning away from "real nature" in a way typical of "European modernism" (26). Yet in all three instances, the landscape is not to be trusted and being in such a landscape often evokes melancholy.

Modern Australians are for the most part removed from the landscape, principally through living in cities that by their very nature are disassociated from the land on which they are built (Tacey *Edge of the Sacred* 139). What regard there is for landscape is often only referenced through unresonate myth. Thus "wide brown land", "open spaces", "white sand ... beaches", and "sapphire blue ... waters" feature in the tourist web site www.Australia.com (n.pag.) Such idealised and stereotypical descriptions dissonate with the drear suburbia, the "*solastalgia"* in which most Australians live, an environment where "ugliness begins with fear of reality ... It ends in betrayal of the element of love ..." (Albrecht *et al*, Boyd 265). Nathanael O'Reilly argues that while Australia is an urban nation, its literary locus has been on the non-urban. So antithetical is suburbia to the imagined national psyche that O'Reilly argues it is often equated with death. Discussing George Johnston's *My Brother Jack* O'Reilly agrees with Robin Gerster's argument that *My Brother Jack* portrays "Suburban Australia as a land of the living dead" (O'Reilly *Exploring Suburbia* Kindle loc. 6333, Gerster "Gerrymander" 566). O'Reilly argues that "actual death and 'living death' are omnipresent" (Kindle loc. 6333) a characteristic that is equally applied by O'Reilly to some of the works by White,

Winton and Carey, among others. The narrator in *My Brother Jack*, David Meredith also refers to the "unmitigated melancholy of those suburban streets", once again equating nihilism, death and melancholy (40).

That Flanagan and Wright seek to remythologise the landscape in terms of their respective, albeit overlapping concerns points to the possibility that it is an incomplete and possibly failed project. The failure leads to not only equivocation and doubt concerning national identity, but national traits that engender nihilism and encourage effacement of the Indigenous. If the project does fail modern Australians, their dissociation leads to suburbias as "raw as a gutted roo, their bloody viscera carved out of the bush only an instant ago" (*One Hand Clapping* 281).

Landscape, history and Indigeneity are themes which have been examined since colonial times. Flanagan and Wright's continuation of that interrogation still resonates within the Australian psyche. Both Flanagan and Wright raise profound questions concerning the recolonising of what has already been colonised. This is not postcolonial literature but an expression of a neo-postcolonialism which in its recursive fascination with colonial and postcolonial issues describes existential angst and contested ontology in terms of landscape, history and Indigeneity, the major elements of magic nihilism.

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Bowraville: twelve stories

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Preface: Welcome to Bowraville

Welcome to Bowraville, the Veranda Post Town and once a Tidy Towns placegetter. Bowraville is famous as the place where the award-winning movie *The Umbrella Woman* was filmed, a tragic tale of rain and love, and for its happy-go-lucky easy-going lifestyle. Bowraville is located on the majestic banks of the mighty Nambucca River and is surrounded by a beautiful and pristine country side. It was founded in 1870 by pioneer cedar getters and now is well known for its natural environment and thriving community of nearly nine hundred people.

Conveniently, Bowraville is almost exactly halfway between Sydney and Brisbane, which makes it a great spot to get off the highway and enjoy the landscape. Why not stop for a beer at the Bowra or a Bundy at the Royal (ask publican Pete Newman to play that Slim Dusty song), or enjoy a delicious lunch (chef's suggestion: chicken breast, mash and cauliflower in a creamy white sauce) at Harris' Café? Bowraville is just 15 kilometres from the highway and is full of friendly people and lots of interesting things to see and do.

Bowraville has its own non-segregated nationally recognised cinema, a bowling club, two pubs, a co-op supermarket, a café, an opportunity shop and an unemployment office. It even has a post office, funeral parlour, folk museum, police station, central school, and an award-winning branch of the Hibiscusland Building Society. It's no exaggeration to say, as proud locals often do, that Bowraville has got the lot!

Even the climate is friendly. Warm, but not too warm, most of the year, Bowraville does have a brief winter when days are warm but nights are cool. Many people say you can swim all year round. Bowraville has some great swimming holes, and

is only a short drive to some fabulous beaches. Bowraville is also famous for having one of the highest rainfalls in NSW. There's never a drought in Bowraville!

Any small country town like Bowraville has a history, and everyone in this part of Bowradise openly acknowledges that ever since that bus ride things may have happened which shouldn't have and things may have been said that should have been left unsaid. Those things were used by a sensationalist city press to create disharmony. We hope that is all in the past. These days Bowraville is a town that pulls together. Its future and prosperity is assured because of its thriving banana and dairy industries and the ever growing interest in you, the tourist. Remember, you shouldn't just judge a book by its colour!

The *Bowraville Argus* and the Bowraville Tourism Board pay special tribute to the original inhabitants of Rubbish Tip Road, and their land rights for living there. Bowraville is the sort of town where everyone knows everyone else, a town where everybody knows we all have to get along together, no matter what our past differences may have been. As one of the community stalwarts, Father Thomas O'Donohue often likes to say, "Under our sins we are all the same in God's eyes."

So come and visit the jewel of the Nambucca. Bowraville is a nice and friendly little town. You'll love it.

Snakes in the Grass

Tom O'Donohue fashioned theories that would be startling had they not been fashioned in Bowraville. A priest self-improved in the theological sciences, he formed his ideas not so much through the reading of uninstructive texts, but by the sheer power of deductive reasoning.

One Friday night using a punctured plastic globe of the Earth, one of Rayleen Newman's knitting needles, the tentative memories of theological lessons on the Montagne Sainte Genevieve and a bottle of scotch, Tom, dressing-gowned and slippered with an anaconda skin satchel on his knees, reasoned extraordinary thoughts concerning snakes. Tom had somehow concluded that the blessed Pádraig himself in the year 485 had cast all serpents seawards in County Antrim, at or near Baile an Chaistil, whereupon they had sinuated their way across the short strait, heading directly to Jura. There they might have received God's mercy, were it not for the swirling sucking waters of the mighty Corryvreckan whirlpool, which draws all who trespass into the very bowels of the earth. Had that not been so then surely all Caledonia would be awash with squirming vermin.

Tom also reckoned, muttering to himself the arguments were irrefutable, that having plummeted to the very core of the Earth the vermin kept going. These snakes gravitated into a region he often reminded his students was the domain of that fallen archangel himself, a demon who could freeze their very souls if they did not behave themselves. The serpents kept plummeting until they arose refreshed and invigorated upstream in the coffee-brown swollen waters of the Nambucca, whereupon the whole filthy damned lot of them made their home in Bowraville.

How else to explain this knot of vipers? Even as the June winter rains were

setting in, a time when sensible serpents should slumber until spring, the very ground moved. The land was alive with brown snakes, tiger snakes, worm snakes, copper heads, banded snakes, red bellies, bardicks, brown and green tree snakes, keelbacks, yellow bellies and white bellies. Upturn any scrap of tin or plastic lying in the thickly-grassed, rain-loaded kikuyu paddocks and a snake or even a pink-tailed worm lizard - in Tom's opinion a snake by another name - would slither in fright.

At least on the whole these were the snakes that were visible. What got slithering under Tom's skin were the unseen snakes. The pythons, carpet snakes and diamond snakes, womas and eastern pythons were even more abundant, but for the large part hidden in trees and under roofs. Their snakelets could wriggle through the finest chook mesh, only announcing their presence through hens inexplicably going off the lay, and chicks impossibly disappearing one by one. Such snakes, fatted on fowl consumption only revealed themselves when their increasing girth made escape impossible. Why, only recently Tom's prized rooster Lucifer, a rare black La Flèche with blood-red horns, had disappeared from his run. The loss was as devastating as it was instructive. Devastating, as Lucifer had won many a blue ribbon at the Bowraville and District Agricultural Show. Indeed, Lucifer was often the only entry in the Rare Breeds section, the competition having pre-empted the inevitable judge's decision by not bothering. Instructive, because it led Tom to the conclusion you can't trust anyone. They were all snakes in the past. Tom naturally suspected a serpent for the disappearance, even though there was no discernible way a snake could enter the run. He knew the determination of snakes. Once Tom had found under the St Mary's School floorboards a desiccated diamond back, two-foot long, hardly grown, frozen by death in the impossible task of eating a ring-tail. Having consumed the head, the snake was unable or unwilling to give up its prey even though it apparently could swallow no

further. And there it died. Just like fallen man, Tom ruminated, unwilling or unable.

These pythons further troubled Tom ecclesiastically, in that his students, though nominally of the faith, were suspected of being heathen in their unschooled thinking. Even the way they moved their bodies, writhing sensuously in their scrappy uniforms as he explained the finer points of the scriptures, suggested these Bowravillians were too comfortable in their skins, a state of being that Tom suspected was not Christian at all. He wished to shed them of such skins. And it wasn't just mish children. Although Bowraville divided itself between town and mish, Tom knew enough of the goings on to suspect the entire town to be either lamingtons or coconuts. It was as if Bowraville had been infected with history and place, so muddying everything that you might as well peer into the flooded Nambucca as peer into how everyone was connected with everyone else. Even his own once-red hair had become a grizzled grey and his pale white skin darkened and blotched with brown freckles, as if they were trying to take over. In his dreams his students would crowd as one, with no awareness of his personal space or the dignity of priesthood. In confirmation classes the young girls, no doubt encouraged by Goddess worshipers, new agers, Silk Peoples and those damned hippies, including that Fernandez fellow who dared call himself Jesus, would raise their hands to cover their mouths, and giggle-whisper of local fantasies concerning a multi-hued serpent, as though such an indecisive reptile (not capable of displaying its true colour) was progenitor of the Lord God Almighty Himself. Just by remembering such instances Tom could shiver his back with revulsion and horror. Not that in any sense he was afraid of serpents. Faith and history had taught him otherwise. Until that very night when Burning Mountain flamed again.

The conflagration of this pile of garbage - for that was exactly what Burning Mountain was, five acres of heaped detritus at the end of Rubbish Tip Road - had a

profoundly dispiriting and creeping effect on all of Bowraville, except Tom. It was as if the fire had conspired to take all the energy out of the place. The reignition also brought opportunity.

It was while thinking his thoughts, conversing softly with himself and Mr Walker or Mr McAllister – Tom wasn't particular as to who was residing in the bottle at the time - that he first became aware that Burning Mountain was alight once more. It was naturally assumed Burning Mountain would at some stage re-ignite as it always did. What drew Tom's attention was not the sullen, red glow reflected off the lower branches of nearby camphor laurels and jacarandas, but the stench. Burning Mountain's fetid odour hung in the damp night air, a sickly sticky miasma that once inhaled made you doubt the possibility of ever smelling anything else.

Tom's once-white wooden St Mary's schoolhouse tottered on termited stumps just a few hundred yards from Burning Mountain on the Rubbish Tip Road. You might think Tom would have slept in the brick rectory up on Carbine Street, where Father McGuire lived, but he preferred the small oblong grey cinder-block construction which stood squatly alongside his schoolhouse, near the one-room clapboard huts of the mish. It was simply furnished without any ostentation, without any object of any worth, not even the snakeskin satchel Tom had been fretting on all day. That morning Rayleen had come to work clammy and pallid, but had cleaned his little house as usual, and cooked his meal as always, but saying nothing. She'd left the satchel behind, as if it wasn't hers to start with. Tom could guess Rayleen had a problem which was now evidently extirpated, even though they spoke not a word about it between them. There was no point in the hiding, but Tom instinctively felt he needed to hide it from its owner, and its contents from Bowraville generally. Only hours had passed, but those hours transfixed Tom with worry. The satchel assured his complicity, suggesting he approved

of what he believed Rayleen had gone and done. He'd spent the entire day hiding it: behind the stove, under his armchair the next, or top of the wardrobe, or behind the books.

He put down the anaconda satchel that had been resting on his knees and moved to the screen door, peering out, nose to the air, sniffing. As his eyes grew accustomed to the dark, he could make out the reflected glow in the trees. There was no doubt, that cursed pile of stinking rubbish was on fire.

"Oh Merciful Mary and Jesus, Thank you!" Tom sounded louder than his usual late night whisperings, his voice lilting with a faint Manx accent and ringing with a certainty somewhat lacking in his sermons. "There is a God!"

Tom buttoned his long black duffel coat over his pyjamas, swapped his slippers for gum boots, and with the satchel under one arm, set off resolutely in the cold light rain of a June night, towards the dim glow. As he walked, he reminded himself to temper his excitement. As they say, a little yearning is a dangerous thing.

The satchel had been on Tom's mind because he believed it was his duty to dispose of it in such a way that no trace could ever be found. This was history in need of erasure. As he fretted about his little house, hiding it here or there, and then thinking it would be so easily found, perhaps even by Rayleen, he had wished for some divine intervention, a guiding hand or a divine determination which would take the responsibility of ownership out of his hands. The good Lord had provided.

"Can someone sin through the actions of others?" Rayleen had asked him a month previous, clicking her tongue and clacking her needles while taking tea at the conclusion of her contracted duties. Rayleen cleaned Tom's little house and cooked his meals for nominal fee. Tom hated the way she made the bed. It was all prissy-tucked

and hospital cornered, so tight that if he were to sleep on his back his feet cramped from their inability to stick up. He would wait until she left before carefully untucking the thin sheets, over which lay the kapok pillow and three old grey woollen mish blankets with blue trim, embroidered in one corner with the official faded blue letters NSWG.

Tom put down his Pelagius and rubbed his chin. There was original sin, but he was trying to think of an answer to what he thought Rayleen was really asking, which was "I am a sinner father, you know this. But it wasn't my fault. Do you think I'll be forgiven?"

"God is very merciful, Rayleen. We can judge people for their supposed sins, but in the end it is God who decides. Whether the sin is known to the sinner or not is not the concern."

Rayleen nodded, bit her lip and silently counted her stitches, not even looking up at him, and wondering whether to tell Cha Cha Hu, to whom she told most things or even Pete her husband, to whom she sadly told little. There would be scenes, incriminations and even cross examinations. Maybe she wouldn't. Maybe she would just head back to Charleville and start again, just two of them, cared for by Mutti. Such arrangements were not as uncommon as they used to be. Neighbours would talk, but their talk would only be of the circumstances they knew about. Was not her silence, Tom thought, a sin in itself? But what he assumed to be a truth was a twisting winding flow with currents and eddies as strong as any Nambucca flood.

The same night Tom was contemplating his restoration of faith, Pete had left Gilberta behind the bar and gone for a walk. He was a sullen fury, hiding himself from the cold dread of believing Rayleen had been with child to the fucking Father, and

somehow they had aborted their lust. He would have it out with Tom, oh yes. But the more he thought, glancing at just the edges of truths, the more his head roared. It was all beyond belief, but who else could it be if not Tom? What secrets were being denied? He'd nearly said it days before when she had come home content and tired from Tom's. He was stacking bar stools when she entered, holding her belly the way women do, even though there was nothing to show.

"You shouldn't work so late at Tom's, Darl. Why not quit, look what it's doing to you." He could have meant her back which had been giving her grief, and there was hardly a hint of menace in his voice. Rayleen, young and athletic and thinking her secret safe from a husband more interested in pig shooting than conversation, waved the concern away.

"We mostly just talk, Pete. He's a lonely old man, he enjoys the company."

Another man would have screamed back. But Pete, biting the inside of his mouth so it bled, thought to himself I shall not cast nasturtiums. The trouble was he half believed Rayleen. He wanted to believe Rayleen. Why would – how could -an old priest do such a thing? Maybe he was imagining things, but the cold in his belly suggested not. Such thoughts unable to be articulated, sat squatly sullen in Pete's being.

Pete slammed a bar stool into place before announcing he was off to bed. Alone. Dark forces were roiling against him. Storm clouds broiled off Darkie's Point. It was one of those fright moments when he realised he had no control over outcomes. Stuff happened no matter what he did. Only a few days ago, driving in the dark he'd nearly killed old Jimmy Wells. It wasn't intentional. But for the grace of God he could now be up for culpable driving. No way Ponty Beaumont, being the local constable, would turn a blind eye to the state of his tractor, the unregistered and uninsured vehicle

with which the accused had culpably endangered the life of the aforesaid Jimmy. Something was tearing Rayleen. As Pete walked up High Street towards the Wilson Road, car headlights grossly distorted and shadowed the old bank building. Shine a certain light on something, Pete bitterly thought, and it could become strange and horrible. Perhaps Rayleen was right. Some things were better off staying in shadows.

He turned right into Carbine Street and kept walking past the church, turning left into Rubbish Tip Road. A light rain began falling, sharp drops needling Pete's skin with their cold. As he got near Tom's school house and cottage he began to notice the stench, slight at first but growing stronger with every step. Pete guessed what it was, and assuming the mantle of Voluntary Fire Brigade Captain kept on walking past Tom's, past the mish, and along the narrow dirt road to the tip. As he walked through the wire gates he saw a figure in a long black coat standing high on the rubbish heap, silhouetted by an angry glow. Instantly recognising the silhouette, he stepped behind a lantana bush and kept watching. The shadowy figure held out a package of some sort and dropped it into the glowing. Looking around to see if he was being watched, but not seeing anything, the figure then strode down the hill towards Pete, still failing to see him, muttering to himself as he went past "Mind the snakes. Jesus wept. Mind the damned snakes. Snakes still out - middle of winter, cold rain and dark night. Unbelievable."

Pete watched him walking back to the mish for a few seconds, then, keeping to the shadows, climbed the tip face to where the fire was and peered down. There was a deep fissure in the garbage, and the stench was overpowering. For a second he thought he saw something move, a squirming of coals, and then he saw it. Not quite within reach of the fire, but already smoking, caught on a root of some long dead tree, was the satchel. Its contents had spilled out and were already alight. Grabbing a long pole from

a pile of oleander cuttings, he fished down the crevice until he had it hooked on the satchel's flap. He flicked it out. It landed on cold wet clay, and stank like burning wool. It was still smoking. Pete used a small stick to open up the pouch sufficiently to peer inside. He had to use another to fish out the only remaining object. Putting it in his pocket, he stood up, and began walking back, pondering on what he had seen.

The tip hadn't always been there, but neither had the mish. Both had followed the mob. Fifty years prior the mob all lived on a small island way downstream at the heads, separated from the river bank by a narrow swampy strait of tidal water. The tip in those days had been on the other side of the strait, as it was too technically challenging for the Shire to place it on the island as well. When the island was made into a golf course it wasn't just the mish that moved to Bowraville. The tip moved as well, the gully making the perfect topography for allowing all the stuff nobody wanted to know about to be swept under the dirt. Mishes and tips, the stuff that nobody wants.

The next day everyone thought rain would simply put Burning Mountain out. It would hiss and splutter while water poured, but then as soon as the rain stopped, as it did occasionally when the clouds need to charge their bloating bladders, the rubbish pile would start smoking again, drenching the town in a tear-inducing miasma. Pete was captain of the volunteer fire brigade, and as it was Saturday, had no problem getting a crew together. They spent hours emptying the tanker, filling it up from a dam on the South Arm Road, and emptying it again down the fiery crevice that transected the pile. The river of water had no effect.

Pete organised the shire grader in the hope of scraping away the problem. He wasn't hopeful. Even if it could be smothered, there was every chance it would re-ignite. Ashes to bloody ashes, one endless cycle, that's what Father Tom O'Donohue said. Ashes to ashes. It was enough to make you weep.

Pete knew there was no real cause for Burning Mountain catching fire. Last summer everyone agreed it caught fire through a morning storm, a thick black and green rumbling that swept in from the north, snapping rocks with lightning strikes and raining so hard you drowned just standing in it. People could feel the electrical charge humming and cracking in the air, creeping into damp skins, tensioning hairs, winding thoughts tight. But this time it could be anything. It could be just because Burning Mountain wanted to be alight.

Burning Mountain snaked along a gully to the south west of the mish for several hundred metres. Its layers of garbage were sandwiched between layers of clay graded from the surrounding land. As soon as one part of it got too high, the Shire would send in the D9, cover it with dirt, and dig out the next bit. Over time the snake mountain would squirm as different parts of the belly were satiated with Bowraville's rot and refuse.

Sunday morning, the tip still alight, Pete and some brigade and Shire men watered the clay for several hours until no more wisps were seen, and then watched Charlie Gleeson working the D9, covering the fissure with more clay. Charlie graded off a section of garbage, while the crew raked over it, exposing any parts that were still alight. Pete and Vince manned the hoses, pouring out a stream so the ground was saturated, then Ron would heap it one side of the gully. They had to scrape the wet stinking garbage before they got down to the raw red clay. Thaddeus Shillingsworth, rumoured to be university educated and therefore the wisest man in Bowraville, directed the occasional car or pickup, expertly twirling his lollipop to keep tip patrons away from the lumbering machinery and the glowing crevice.

Despite the water the clay was brick hard, so it clanged and screamed when the blade scraped. As Ron worked, everyone noticed there were large fissures running along

the length of the clay bed. Many of them were smoking. Pete dragged a hose over to the first one, and sprayed it with water. A geyser of hot steam erupted from the fissure, so hot that Pete stood back for a while. He watered it more, drenching the crack, and then walked over again to look.

Peering down all he saw at first was rising steam. It was hot down there. The rotten burning stench was still there, but was now suffused with the smell of steaming river water.

"That's it. We got it," he said to the others. "I reckon this is where the whole show was coming from."

He stood for a while smoking a roll-your-own. A couple of the men joined him, standing around, looking down the crevice and occasionally saying a word, like "shit" or "Jesus" while flicking their ashes onto the rising steam. It was becoming apparent the fire wasn't out yet. Pete, peering down, watched the rolly stub spiral down and then stood back a couple of paces and turned the nozzle of the fire hose, letting a huge stream of water cascade into the fissure again. Once again, clouds of hot steam billowed up, but Pete just held the hose there, hoping to drown the fire out. The steam was the hiss of a thousand angry snakes, the sea sucked from rocks, a shudder. After twenty minutes, the water ran out, and Pete rolled up the hose to the truck so it could go off and refill the tank. Wiping sweat and condensed steam from his face, he went over to the fissure to see what effect the water had had on the fire.

Again he peered down, remembering as a little boy peering into his mother's jewel box, the rings and brooches glowing in the lamplight. He imagined embers flicking and throbbing with brilliant reds, yellows, blues and oranges. Not believing his eyes, he stared open mouthed. In the steaming gloom were slithering embers.

"Holy Jesus - look at this. Look at it. Oh Holy Jesus!" he yelled. He savagely brushed his eyes with his flannel sleeve, alarmed at the tears. Some of the others came over, and thinking that Pete was astonished at the ferocity of the embers, failed to see what Pete had seen.

"I'll be buggered," said Ron. "The damn thing is still alight. You'd think all that water would have put it out by now." Pete didn't say. How can you explain seeing something like that? His fingers curled around the burnt woollen object in his pocket. Ashes to ashes.

As Pete asked that night after a sullen dinner, turning his tear-stained face to Rayleen, but not saying what he had found. "The weird thing is, after we put the hose down the crevice, I swear I saw a snake moving as if the flames hadn't meant anything. How can a snake do that?"

Rayleen replied with silence. Choking back her own tears, and pretending to herself everything would work out, she didn't hear his words above her own thought clatter and the howling belly emptiness. A question and answer from earlier in the day was playing over and over in her head.

The question and answer took many forms. One went:

"Hey Ray, remember that satchel from Florida I gave you? You know the one made out of anaconda skin? Whatever happened to that?" There was ever so slight menace in Pete's voice, which Rayleen chose not to register.

"Dunno Darl, must be around somewhere."

They bought the satchel in Orlando while honeymooning on a Disneyworld package. The shop, on West Pine, was called Alligator Joe's. The satchel was hued in

gold and blacks, richly patterned like a carpet snake. Rayleen imagined the patterns were letters conveying a secret message, just for her. The message was "Go Home."

"This is real fine leather. See how it shimmers," the assistant said. "And the good thing is, you're helping kill vermin. These anacondas are a pest here. They don't belong. Just like those rabbits I seen on the TV messing up your neck of the woods."

Pete, scraping his plate, listening to her silence, thought she had nothing to say. Perhaps he should have it out now, but again stopped himself. He didn't want things to end this way. A squirming fury was swallowing him whole. Had he been imagining things? It was so crazy. She had been suffering from a sore back so bad she had put Gilberta on for extra shifts, but then had continued doing housework for Tom O'Donohue. There were a couple of times when she seemed to want to say something, but didn't. Thinks I'm too stupid to notice anything, Pete's thoughts raged. He closed his eyes and momentarily swaying, saw the fiery snake wriggle in the crevice. He smelled the burning snake skin.

The miasma, a foggy chemical stench of white smoke curled low over the town all day Sunday and then into Monday. The tip was alight, and there wasn't anything anyone could do about it. At night people closed their homes, and wept silently on their couches or into their pillows, hoping in the stillness for some slight breeze, some waft of air currents, that might blow the smoking stench elsewhere.

All of Bowraville cried. Even Jude Silber, who never wept, not even with his losses, streamed tears as he sat behind his desk plucking at his cardigan and listening attentively to that shit-poor Andy Murray, massively and uncomfortably crammed into one of Jude's office chairs whine about his lot in life, asking for yet another loan he had no hope of paying, "When the Freedom Scouts win govmint, things'll be different then,

you'll see." Jude politely refused him, yet again. Jude sweated even though it was winter, and his office was just 14 degrees, thinking how long did he have before Constable Beaumont knocked on his door, asking all those questions all over again, before getting around to the real purpose of his visit? Jude would say of course she had consented, which was a truth: and she had, despite whatever fantasies were going on in her head right now. Women were like that. All the women he'd ever cared for in his life had left Bowraville and him behind, accusing him of doing or not doing all sorts of made up things. Perhaps that's what he should do too: leave. What was he still doing here? The answer increasingly seemed to do with what he had under the picnic blanket in the boot of his pale blue Hillman.

Most of Bowraville cried silently, not wishing to draw attention to themselves. Mrs Ringland, her rain-dropped face dripping on school books and blurring her eyes so much she only saw the shadow outlines of her students, admonished Philip "Frypan" Shillingsworth, who sat at his desk sobbing not because of the smoke, but because of what he knew. Tears flowed so freely that Mrs Ringland found it hard to tell whether the misty miasma drifting over the town from Tip Road was a reality, or merely a lachrymal filtering of some ancient grief that had only now surfaced. Those bus people had accused her of being complicit in keeping such students out, but it was only for their own good. Boys like Frypan Shillingsworth didn't belong. That afternoon, making sure he was unseen, Frypan crept next door, and quietly knocked on Constable Ponty Beaumont's back door.

The smoke was sweet and sickly. It made sore throats and eyes redden with tears. A smoke cloud of sorrows, billowing layers of regret. The cloud of smoke was stuck to the town. The cloud, a constant puff floating from a large crack in the rubbish pile, rose up above the mish, high into the air, a sea eagle on a spiral, before swooping

down on High Street.

Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow. The sadness now had only been part of Bowraville a day or two at most. It had been found near Lane's bridge after Frypan's talk with Constable Beaumont, a curled up enigma and a call to prayer, so small that Bernie Lamont, a funeral director fallen on hard times had tear tumbling cheeks while he screwed the lid down tight on Maria Taufa, while listening to Cha Cha Hu sob in the small anteroom he called the chapel, and thinking he'd have to make such a small box himself. You only had to look to know that sadness should have been left buried. No physical marks, no story to tell except, sniffing the blanket there was the same sickly smell as the smoke, as if the smoke now inhabited all things. People asked who could do such a thing? It was inconceivable that the mother wouldn't be noticed, that everyone wouldn't have known. And yet there was the evidence, lying in the cool brightness of Bernie's work room.

Rayleen had enough of her own problems to bother worrying about Pete. She put his tension and sullen anger down to all that business with Gilberta, who hadn't been herself lately, and Jimmy Wells' narrow escape from death, not realising it was all the business with what he saw that night on Burning Mountain that was tearing his head apart. He was having bad dreams so real he had to lie there sweating for a few minutes on waking up, confused as to whether he was remembering reality or imagination. In the dreams he stood up the hill outside the Commercial Bank building looking down High Street as lightning flickered in the sky, watching Rayleen pull out of the Royal car park and drive north down High Street towards the Macksville Road. He watched, knowing from the pain in his throat he would never see her again, but unable to call out her name.

Almost a week after Burning Mountain reignited, snakes and fire conspired

against Tom when he offered to help Pete re-roof the Royal. Like paddock priests do, he sometimes offered his labour for projects, fully realising the benefactor was now morally indebted to the Church in general and himself in particular. Pete accepted the offer sullenly because there were things he had to ask Tom, things he couldn't ask his wife. He knew some dark force had pulled them apart; that he no longer knew who she was. On the roof of the Royal was as good a place as any to have it out with that old goat Tommy O'Donohue.

Which is how squatting on the Royal's roof, sipping from a plastic bottle, smiling in admiration of his own joke, Tom waited for Pete's groan. Normally not his style, but feeling quite light-hearted and pleased with himself, Tom thought he could afford a little banter with Pete. Even if had known by then of what was found near Lane's Bridge earlier in the week he would not have in his wildest imagination thought it was anything to do with Rayleen's problems. Not knowing any details at all, he had assumed she had sought and received assistance, probably from the Hendry woman who lived River Street. He did not ask, of course, but thought at least Rayleen's marriage was safe. Some things were best left unsaid. The keeping of secrets may not have set things straight. That was now in God's hands. But in his relief, Tom thought he could afford a little mirth. It would be a story to tell.

Tom was a small wiry man who for jobs such as this wore work boots, blue shorts and a tattered blue singlet. He and Pete had climbed up in the morning and using small crowbars had started levering the old rippled asbestos sheets off the building, dropping them onto the Parramatta grass and thistles on the river side. Pete was distracted. Today was Thursday, and Rayleen had gone off to Macksville shopping after the argument.

"Are you sleeping with someone?" he had said, not even intending to. The

words were moths out of the mouth. Pete was astonished at their escape.

"Sleeping with someone? Jesus, Pete. Who would you think I'm having an affair with? Ponty?" The retort was venomous.

"Have you had an abortion? Has that Hendry woman got anything to do with this? And Tom, does he even know you were pregnant?"

Rayleen's eyes blazed. "Why would you care if I was pregnant or not? You spend more time pig fucking shooting with fucking Ponty than with me. You've never wanted kids anyhow. So isn't it a good thing that no, I'm actually not pregnant? And as for Tom. I'm not even going to dignify such a pathetic remark with a response." Pete had hurled his coffee cup at her, but she had sidestepped it as it smashed against the wall, gathering her purse, keys and a tin from under the counter.

"We need to talk about this," Pete had wailed, realising he couldn't, but she didn't even look at him. "I've got some shopping to do. I'll see you when I see you," she said quietly, finally. Her responses had only confused matters. His sullen fury at Tom was such he could hear the blood pumping in his veins, the thump thump thump of the death march drums.

They worked quickly, as rain threatened. Tom saw the heat-bleached turd, as big as a dog's, sitting on the silvery flakes of crumbling sarking when the first sheet of asbestos came off. That's how he knew. That was his secret. Pete, not used to the hard labour, and feeling out of sorts, failed to notice anything, not even the bit of sarking that momentarily rose like a whiff of breeze had caught it when they took off the third sheet.

When it came to the last sheet Tom had to concentrate on making the corners of his mouth limp. He waved his hand at Pete. It would be great one to tell.

"You do it, you do it. The poor old bugger needs a breather."

Pete nodded to Tom and started levering the sheet off with the small bar. Tom shut his eyes, moving his lips, looking for all the world as if he was praying, and then took a swig of water, trying to stop his shoulders from shuddering. Waiting.

"Ooooh Holy Mother of God!" Pete moaned as if he'd been knifed, staggering back horrified.

"Hey easy," Tom yelled, flinging out his arms. "Look out for the edge."

Pete scrambled back to Tom. "Did you see it? Did you? Jesus and Mary wept. What do we do?" Tom shuddered with silent laughter.

"You bastard. You knew. You set me up for that. Jesus, Mary and Joseph he was big. I've never seen one that big. Did you see him?"

"Steady on. Just a diamond. Won't bite you." Tom patted Pete on the shoulder, wondering why he had more tears in his eyes than Burning Mountain warranted. The man was clearly terrified. Tom began to regret the joke. What was the matter with him? He should have known. There were lots of resident pythons in Bowraville roofs. It was year-round warm there, and at night they could slither down and steal eggs from the runs.

Pete sat down next to Tom, wiping the tears from his eyes with a corner of his singlet. It was just a python. He shouldn't be so scared by a python. Just a python. Every time he blinked he saw it. Not the python under the sheet, of course, that wasn't it, but the thrashing one writhing angrily in the ground, each of the diamonds on its bejewelled skin like fire. He never got near that one, but somehow it bit him, so now his thoughts were full of poison. He reached into his pocket and drew out a blue knitted

baby's bootie, singed at the edges. He slapped it into Tom's lap and looked away, biting his lip. Turning again towards Tom, the veins of his neck were livid as he said the words with such hate that flecks of spittle flew into Tom's face.

"Call yourself a priest, eh? What about this? What about this?"

Before you leap

In the weeks before Burning Mountain flared Jimmy Wells would explain his theory of time travel to anyone who was listening, anyone being mostly Gilberta Brinkerhoff who seemed to seriously consider anything he was saying. Perhaps she was just trying to understand him. Jimmy had a broad accent and a soft slur to his words. Gilberta had learnt her English in a Hamburg *Gymnasium*.

"Most people," Jimmy said, using his cigarette for emphasis, "think travel to the past has to be impossible because of the paradoxes it would create. Take the grandmother paradox. If you travelled back in time and killed your own grandmother, you couldn't possibly exist." Jimmy would raise his eyebrows and pause, waiting for Gilberta to nod her head in agreement. It was always Gilberta he ended up talking to. No-one else in the whole of Bowraville took him seriously, except perhaps Thaddeus Shillingsworth who was into traditional stuff, but who, hypothetically, if he went to the pub would not go to the Royal, but to the Bowra, because it had a dark room, and he was smart and knew his place.

"But what if we don't just travel back in time, we travel to another part of the multiverse? What if, at the moment of killing, you slipped into a parallel universe where she was not your grandmother?" He moved some cardboard beer coasters around to illustrate his point, and raised his eyebrows again, his face crinkling with the question. Only it wasn't a question this time, because Jimmy was sure of his thesis. Time travel, Jimmy reasoned, was not only possible, but was necessarily the very means to travel to parallel worlds.

Jimmy claimed to be studying via correspondence for a degree in philosophy from Armidale. He'd been saying this for years now. No one could say if this was just

another one of his stories, though Joanie Phale, who was studying for a Biodynamic Permaculture Certificate II part time at the same place, said she once saw someone looking a lot like Jimmy on the campus. That's what she said, but all she had seen was an older, skinny man carrying a sack over his shoulder. He looked a bit like Jimmy, but he also looked a bit like anyone.

Gilberta never much expressed a view on anything. As an illegal, it was in her own best interest not ever to be noticed. But that wasn't the real reason she kept to herself.

Gilberta's real reason was she was afraid. "You have to understand I am afraid. That is why I have come to this place," she once said, pronouncing each syllable precisely, to Rayleen. Rayleen listened carefully, one hand on the bar and another on her back which had been giving her some grief. Lately she'd been sweating a lot, like it was summer.

"Afraid of what, Pet?"

"Of everything."

Gilberta's everything included Rayleen. Something seemed to be gnawing at her being, growing like a tumour. Knowing Rayleen's German was poor, but thinking of no other way of expressing herself without possible offence from Pete or patrons misconstruing, Gilberta had once leaned in and slowly whispered "*Bist du schwanger*?" to which Rayleen, looking startled, had waved her hand saying "*Na, na.*"

Despite her problems, and she had a few, Gilberta managed to hold down a job working for Pete and Rayleen at the Royal, mainly on account of Rayleen's soft spot for all things German. Lately, The Royal had become Jimmy's favourite watering hole, not because of the television or the society - there were better amenities even in the Bowra's

dark room - but because of Gilberta herself. In a way it was a good thing Rayleen's back was so bad lately, because it meant more work for Gilberta, and more opportunity for Jimmy.

Andreas - who was legal - had ten acres of scrub and a small cliff face a few miles out on North Arm. He built himself a two-roomed cottage out of red gum, sawdust and cement, but had found himself away a lot in Sydney, helping Helmut renovate a terrace on Glebe Point Road. He found it was more convenient when going home to live closer to town on Miriam's property in a small shed he made himself, and more lately, in a shipping container that had come with a waterlogged library. His deal with Gilberta was she could live on his property in return for looking out for bushfires and thieves. You wouldn't think Andreas had all that much for a thief to steal, but he was adamant that someone or something was stealing his chickens. It was as if they kept vanishing into thin air.

Gilberta accepted the deal. Andreas' house was small, but discrete, built at the edge of a small mudstone cliff, overlooking the Noble paddocks, but sufficiently hidden from view that no-one driving up the road would ever guess someone was living there.

Andreas' house wasn't much bigger than a small kitchen and a bed. Andreas had rigged himself a shower using black hose and an olive drum, but Gilberta wanted something more civilised. Using rocks, and an old enamel bathtub she hauled from the Noble paddocks where it had been once used as a watering trough and some bush rocks, she built herself up an outdoor bathroom. She'd fill the bath with a hose from the water tank, and then light a long low fire underneath it. Done just right, the fire would provide a hot bath that could go on for hours. She would sit in the bath, luxuriating in warmth and the annihilation of time.

Which is probably one of the reasons why Jimmy was so keen to explain his theory of time travel to her. Jimmy had concluded he was in love with Gilberta. She listened to him. She considered what he had to say. Jimmy, who had never known love, thought this is what it must be like. A couple who talk to each other, just like Rayleen and Pete. Jimmy would watch the wordless communication between Rayleen and Pete behind the bar, believing Rayleen's daydreaming glances out the window and sighs were the results of love, and not a gnawing desire to leave.

Like Gilberta, Jimmy also lived on the North Arm Road, about eight clicks out. He didn't have a bicycle so had to cadge lifts or walk into town. Sometimes he'd cut across the Noble paddocks, which saved him twenty minutes walking. It was while walking through those paddocks on his way home one still, moonlit night that he had turned to look up and behind him. Sound travels a long way on nights like that: in Bowraville you can often hear freight trains rumbling through Macksville on their way up the coast. Perhaps he heard Gilberta having one of her many arguments with herself. Perhaps he heard her hiss "*Es ist unheimlich*!" The point is, Jimmy looking up saw not too far away and seemingly hovering mid-air in the night darkness, Gilberta bare shouldered in her makeshift bath, haloed by candles, bathing in starlight.

Gilberta was not what you would call beautiful. She was in her early 20s, but her body was thin and muscular, more like a boy's than a girl's. She had small breasts, a long back, and long thin hands and feet. Her blond hair was shoulder length and lank. But to Jimmy, standing silently in the field below, she was a vision from another world.

No-one could recall Jimmy ever thinking he was in love before. He wasn't what most women, even in Bowraville, would think of as a good catch. He had a reputation for ogling the Phales skinny-dipping in the water holes near Lane's Bridge, but apart from that he had shown no other interest in the opposite sex that anyone could recall in

his fifty two years. Like Gilberta, Jimmy lived alone, his house being some converted cow bales that were large enough that he even had an indoor kitchen. No one could ever recollect him ever having a job, except for filling in forms at the unemployment office. Someone once claimed that his mother was from Wellington, the one near Dubbo, which would have meant that he was part of a mob. It wasn't the sort of question you would put to him direct, but Pete had once put the question in terms of lamingtons to Thad Shillingsworth, who said he most probably wasn't.

"But I know who is," Thad chuckled, tapping his nose. "I reckon there's a few gubbas round here who ain't all the purity and white they pretend to be. Could be anyone. Hey, maybe even your missus." Thad laughed quietly at his own joke. Pete snorted. Rayleen's parents were German immigrants. Her mother still lived in Charleville, where Rayleen grew up which meant Rayleen being a lamington was as likely as Therese Hendry, president of the Building Bridges Committee, announcing in the *Bowraville Argus* she was part Gumbaynggirr.

Even people who didn't know Jimmy knew Jimmy. If driving along the North Arm at night, scanning the verges for wallabies or stray steers, you suddenly stomped on your brakes to avoid hitting a skinny man with long grey hair and a hessian sack over one shoulder, then you knew it was Jimmy. Jimmy took the sack everywhere he went. No-one was ever allowed to look inside. Some had sworn that sometimes they had seen something move inside that sack.

Jimmy's luscious lip-smacking descriptions of Gilberta floating in the void naked hardly made an impression at the Royal bar. There were better dreams on the Pirelli calendar Pete kept above the till. He'd often make comments about the printed flat bare bellies compared to Rayleen's noticeable little beer gut, rubbing insults into wounds. Pete would chuckle to himself about his little jokes, not quite realising the

distance he was creating. Rayleen soon discovered what Jimmy was huddling with the patrons about and told him to stop it or be banned for life. She took him aside and told him quietly of what everyone else in town knew.

"She's special, Jimmy. You can't go around talking about it like that. She needs looking after." Jimmy nodded, filled with shame about how he had described Gilberta to the other patrons. He had been so taken by his own description he'd failed to realise no-one, not even Angus MacNisse, who Jimmy reckoned also had the desire to gaze goggle-eyed at Joanie and Jo Phale when they bathed at the Lane's Bridge water hole, had been impressed with Jimmy's description of Gilberta.

It wasn't just that Gilberta looked a bit ordinary. It was just that practically everyone in Bowraville had seen Gilberta naked at some time. Some of them had seen her naked up close and in broad daylight. Pete and Rayleen could count two times since they had employed her when she had turned up naked for work. One of them had simply driven her home, put her to bed, and told her to stay at home until she felt better. It worked just as well as Judy Cameron's visits to the Jordan Centre in Coffs Harbour, a place Gilberta could not visit, on account of having no valid medical card, passport or visa. Pete had once seen a book called *Die Nature* and he reckoned it explained a lot about Gilberta in particular and those Germans in general. "Not on this planet" or "lost in another universe" summed up the general view of Gilberta Brinkerhoff.

Nonetheless, Bowraville looked after its own, and everyone considered Gilberta one of their own.

Not only did Jimmy believe he loved Gilberta, but he was pretty sure that the feelings were reciprocated, because he was one of the few people Gilberta would talk

to, one of the few people Gilberta would look in the eye.

"Your theory is so ... so … ludicrous Jimmy," she said to him. "What is this multiverse? What is this time travel? There is just past, present and future. That is all. There is no time travel. It is ridiculous. You just have the wishful thinking to imagine that these things are possible at all."

Jimmy's face would crinkle up in a smile. Although dismissive, Gilberta was the first person in his life who took him seriously. "You just need to think about it Gilberta. It makes you think, you have to give me that."

"I am sorry to say this, but it is all just stupidity, I think."

Jimmy had even asked Gilberta out several times within the hearing of everyone at the bar. Not on dates as such. Jimmy's universe had no understanding of dates. But he did use words like go with. "Maybe you could go with me to the races next Saturday," he'd say. "I could teach you how to bet on the horses."

She had always refused. She thought Jimmy harmless enough, but he was a man, and she was having nothing to do with men. Joanie Phale when she found that little nugget had tried to suggest Gilberta have something to do with the alternative, but she was having none of that either. And even, hypothetically speaking, were she to have a relationship, it would not be with the likes of someone who was like Jimmy. It was all too complicated. Her head was filled with other things anyway, like the reasons she had run away at seventeen, turning up at Andreas's door a year later, dirt tired and completely broke.

Jimmy knew nothing of Gilberta's history, or problems. He didn't listen to anyone's gossip except his own, and only came into town once a fortnight on a Thursday, more frequently since his unearthly vision in the Noble fields. He persisted in

his invitations. She persisted in her refusals.

As winter started to set in, Gilberta's voices became louder, arguing with her body as to which one of them should have the most attention. Rayleen sent her home when she started screaming at one of the patrons for leaving rum at the bottom of his glass. Jimmy, not knowing any of this, came in one evening, asked where Gilberta was and was told she was sick. He drank, as he always did, until well after nightfall, and heaving his hessian sack over his shoulder, started for home, walking along North Arm road.

On nights such as this, Jimmy didn't look around, but only at his feet. Jimmy wasn't one to look at the landscape as he walked. The drinking often made him unsteady. He was getting old. He kept his eyes firmly on his feet, watching them fall one in front of the other, his once-pink sheepskin boots (claimed from Joanie Phale's rubbish bin) clomping on the asphalt, past the wet verge grasses, the rain dripped rocks, the sodden plastic bags, the glistening beer cans, the moist mosses and smoking puffballs and the naked feet and legs of a passing girl.

Jimmy stopped, swaying slightly, his head bowed in thought. Had he really seen someone, a barefoot girl, walk past him, so close he could have reached out and touched her? He swung around. Not five metres away he saw the back of a naked girl, walking along the road, her blond hair shining in the moonlight, her skin the colour of creamy roses.

Jimmy extended a hand after her, his brow creased in puzzlement.

"Gilberta, is that you? Hey Gilberta! Hoo!" he said, but there was no reply, and in several seconds the girl slipped from view.

At first, Jimmy didn't know what to make of this. He was too wrapped up in his

own world to know, as everyone else in Bowraville did, of Gilberta's naked turns. He shook his head to clear it of his muddled thoughts and decided it could only mean one thing: a declaration of love. Why else would a girl cast all modesty to the wind and walk past him so close he could feel her body heat? And if she loved him, it only cemented and compounded Jimmy's feeling for her.

Gilberta hadn't answered Jimmy because she hadn't heard him. When she had one of her turns Gilberta wouldn't hear or remember anything. One minute she'd be at home, maybe stoking her little oven with the thought of baking some bread. The next, to her great shame, she'd find herself waking up in her small bed, covered in scratches, her feet muddy, or at the Banana Growers' Co-op supermarket, surrounded by concerned staff offering coats and scarves with which to hide herself. Day time was bad enough. She knew the night time nature walks were beginning to be a concern for everyone.

As well as helping run The Royal with Rayleen, Pete kept a few yearlings on some leased land on the North Arm Road. He had an old Massey in a falling down brick shed in the Royal's back yard, which also housed a few little bottles of cocky's cheer, (a stash to lubricate the weekends with Ponty) and would take it and a slasher held together with six-gauge fencing wire up the road every few months to slash, dump some bales and lick-blocks into some old Dieldrin tins, and do a bit of fencing.

The tractor had a few features, in that it really didn't have any. No brake, no lights, belched great clouds of black diesel, and had bits so rusted that they only held on through the judicious use of yet more six-gauge. The front end carryall had rusted through, and Pete had merely bolted a few planks over the hole rather than weld a new plate on. Ponty Beaumont, a practitioner of practical policing, usually turned a blind eye to the mechanical state of the crumpled cars, broken bikes, old buses, dilapidated trucks

and rusting tractors, mostly uninsured and unregistered, that were used around Bowraville. But in the case of Pete's Massey Ferguson, or what was left of it, he was forced to make an exception. The tractor was dangerous, so there was no way he was going to allow it to be driven on a public road on his beat.

Which is why Pete only drove it up to his acres, or from his acres back to the Royal, at night when he guessed Ponty was half asleep watching TV. Dark nights, but not so dark you couldn't see anything.

A while after this, one Saturday night at the beginning of June when the winter rains were settling in, Pete said to Rayleen he was walking up to the paddock to bring the tractor back.

"Have to bring the tractor back, and get the steers into the lantana paddock. These showers keep up there's going to be a lot of land under water."

"If you must," Rayleen said, in a way that left a lot unsaid. Pete, too lazy to fix his tractor so it could be registered, was always leaving her to mind the pub at a moment's notice. Often he'd wait until the Friday night before announcing he was going pig shooting for the weekend with Ponty. Usually she had Gilberta to help out, but tonight she was on her own. The thing was, Pete seemed to think it was reasonable that his he could drop everything for his pin money project, whereas nearly every time she cleaned for Tommy O'Donohue these days there was grief. Pete took his time putting on his Drizabone, not willing to ask for a lift.

Rayleen waited a few moments before turning and saying. "You'll have to walk it – I can't leave the bar. If you had told me earlier, we could have got Gilberta in." She knew her own lie. She had sent Gilberta home earlier in the day, as she was showing all the signs of having one of her turns.

Pete thought for a second of bringing up the possibility of letting Gilberta go. She was a luxury they could do without. Rayleen's sullen temper argued against it. For a brief second or two a feeling of utter dread slithered over him. Something was happening between himself and Rayleen and he didn't even have the words to say what it was. He pushed the feeling aside, deciding to let it go for another time.

Pete put on rubber boots, and turned up the collar of his coat. It wasn't raining hard, like it sometimes does in Bowraville, but it was starting to rain steady. Fortunately, there was no-one driving the road at this time of night. He figured he would have to step well off the verge if he saw headlights, as there was no chance in this weather of any driver seeing him.

In fifteen minutes Pete reached his paddocks. He grabbed a large stick, and squelched through the soggy grass to the top paddock, wrestling the wire-and-stick gate open. All his steers, white faced and black coated, were standing head to head in a circle, as cattle do in the rain, under a large solitary camphor laurel tree. Crying "Hey," and "Yip" Pete walked in a curve towards them, waving his stick, encouraging them to go to the gate. At first, they all just stood and stared, floating skulls in the gloom, watching him approach. Then one young steer gave a small bellow and bolted to the gate, and the rest, seeing leadership, trotted after him, bellowing softly. At the last second, one bolted the other way, and went galloping off towards the gully. Pete cursed. He was angry. He and Rayleen had been brewing storm clouds for months. If she was pregnant why didn't she say so? Own up and tell him who the father was? The thought of what people would say sickened him.

"Fuck youse! Fuck the fucking lot of youse," he screamed at the escaped steer, which had now stopped, realising it had separated from the herd. He tried to imagine what he would say to Tom O'Donohue, but could only feel his rage. No words came. It

couldn't be Tom O'Donohue – he was an old priest. But if not him, then who? He smashed his stick against the tree trunk. He couldn't chase the beast in the dark. He'd sort it out in the morning. Besides, it was likely to follow the fence up to the high ground in a while, because that's where the rest of the herd now was. Pete shut the gate and walked down to the road gate, where he had the tractor parked. He had to scoop the rain from the metal seat. It took a little coaxing for the engine to cough into life. He sat there for about a minute, adjusting the choke. Satisfied the engine wouldn't die, he slipped off the metal seat, and opened the wire gate to the road. He climbed back up the tractor, and slowly drove it out of the gate. It took a few yards to stop, the brakes or lack of them being one of Ponty's concerns. He closed the gate, then climbed back in his seat, and squinting through the dark rain for the sheen of the asphalt road, started the drive back into town.

The road back to town had a few hills in it, and Pete put them to good use. On the downward stretch he'd put the tractor into neutral, only gearing it when it was half way up the next hill. It was at the bottom of one of the downward slopes, when he was going at full speed, that he saw a ghost like shape in the middle of the road. Someone was walking in front of him, seemingly unaware of the hurtling machinery behind. As he got closer, he could make out the fact it was a young woman, walking in the rain, stark naked. Gilberta on one of her night time rambles. Pete yelled, but she didn't respond as he sped past her.

It took Pete a hundred yards or so to stop the tractor. He got down and watched her walking towards him. She didn't seem to notice the rain, didn't even seem to notice him or the tractor. Just walked, staring at the ground, as bare as the day she was born.

When she was in hearing range Pete started to call her name softly. At first she

didn't seem to listen, but then she looked at Pete, intensely puzzled.

"Pete? Where am I? What am I doing here? Oh my God, where are my clothes? Oh *Scheisse* Pete!" Most women would have tried then and there to cover themselves with their hands. Gilberta didn't.

"You had one of your turns Gilberta. Here, let me take you back home. Take my raincoat."

"But you will get soaking wet, Pete. I cannot do this." Gilberta started crying. "Sometimes I feel someone else is in control of me. It is so scary."

"You'll have to sit in the carryall, Gilberta. I'll take you back to the pub. You can sleep there. Rayleen will fix you some soup."

Pete helped Gilberta up into the carryall, and draped her with a bit of tarpaulin lying on the boards. He got up into his seat, and started up the tractor. Something was going to have to be done about Gilberta. Perhaps Andreas could convince her to go back to Hamburg. She was getting worse. She had discarded the tarpaulin and was now standing in the carryall, one arm holding onto the jib like she was standing on the bow of a boat. Pete drove slowly. He tried turning his lights on, but they didn't work. At last the rain stopped. The night was relatively warm. He would get Gilberta back to the pub and into a bed. She needed looking after.

Meanwhile Jimmy, now sure the rain had stopped grabbed his sack and started walking toward the Noble paddocks. Ever since his vision and his encounter with her on the road Jimmy was convinced Gilberta was in love with him. Perhaps tonight he would see her again. Jimmy now knew of Gilberta's condition, and thought he was one who could help. This time he would show he cared. As he walked through the pastures, he kept his head high, hoping to see his beloved Lorelei bathing on top of the cliffs,

seemingly floating amongst the clouds.

She wasn't there. It was just black where Gilberta's bathtub should have been. Hoping she'd make an appearance, Jimmy slowly walked towards the road. He debated whether he'd go into town so late, and nearly decided against it. But then he thought, a few rums, and later, in the middle of the night, he'd walk back home, filling his sack with Ivan's bananas on the way. Jimmy lived on things like Ivan's bananas.

Jimmy often walked to and from town. If he heard a car coming the way he was heading he'd turn around, walking backwards, his left arm outstretched with his thumb pointed, asking for a lift. Tonight, he heard a low-geared truck approaching. He looked but couldn't see any lights, but started walking backwards, his arm outstretched, expecting any second now to see the lights of a possible lift.

Jimmy stopped walking and stood transfixed as he saw Gilberta emerge from the gloom, stark naked and seemingly to float a foot or two above the road. She was floating like a ghost hurtling towards him her arms outstretched in warning. He could see her erect nipples and the look of horror on her face.

"Get off the fucking road!" Pete screamed, as Jimmy, confounded, took another step towards the tractor.

"Please Jimmy! Move!" Gilberta yelled. She seemed to be floating above him. It was as if time stood still.

Some things happened that night, some things scarcely talked about and not really understood by any of the people concerned.

Even though she saved his life, Jimmy just wasn't keen on Gilberta anymore. Some thought it might be because in a way Gilberta had endangered his life in the first

place. A woman, German or not, had no right to wander North Arm naked at night. For Jimmy it was as if at the moment Gilberta threw him off the road there had been a shift in the order of things. Jimmy even stopped sprouting his theories, preferring to sit in a corner of the bar reading an old water damaged paperback edition of Lucretius that Andreas had given him in exchange for some of Ivan's bananas. Gilberta would sometimes bring him a drink, sometimes on the house, but Jimmy hardly even acknowledged her. Gilberta would linger by his little round table, maybe trying to think of something to say. Eventually she would turn on her heel, sighing, and return to the bar.

It wasn't just Jimmy who had changed. Gilberta too. Everyone knew she now had eyes for Jimmy, but no-one could figure out why. And for weeks she hadn't had a single turn. And perhaps she had figured out the spectacle Jimmy used to brag about, because Jimmy - in fact no-one - skited about her bathing routines behind her back again. She had even written a letter to her parents in Hamburg saying she was safe and well.

Pete was shaken by the whole incident. Later that night he told Rayleen he thought he'd killed both of them, and it was only when they got out of the ditch he realised that Gilberta had saved Jimmy. Afterwards, he still drove his tractor at night after Ponty had finished his shift, but had the lights fixed properly. He also took down the Pirelli calendar above the till, saying he'd seen enough nakedness for the time being.

The end of Joy

Watching the falling stars and holding Maria just one last time, Cha Cha Hu could think of nothing else but the way Rayleen made the hospital corners on Father Tom O'Donohue's narrow bed after they had lain together. It was never sexual. They just lay together, him mostly listening and stroking her hair while she told him all the things she couldn't tell Pete. As he sat and watched, she would smooth the thin grey blankets slowly with her elegant long hands, looking for any rumples almost wistfully. Perhaps the blanket contours offered the promise of a terrain she could escape to. Rayleen was fastidious in making up the bed. Both she and Cha Cha were sure no-one knew how they used it.

Cha Cha was a case, but he had sad kind eyes and knew how to listen. He wasn't the least bit guilty about lying on the bed. One of Tom O'Donohue' theories was that the further you moved from the centre, the less susceptible you were to moral gravity. So someone a long way from the centre could almost float free of any societal concerns. It wasn't amorality, Tom hastened to add, it was just a response to a physical situation. "Centre of what?" you might say, trying to make some sense of the conversation, because the question Tom was supposed to be answering was concerning Rayleen's current whereabouts, not Tom's latest theory, and Tom looked at you surprised with his head cocked to one side, maybe listening closely to the Bach cello suite playing softly through the transistor on the side table next to his arm chair, and say "Centre of Bowraville, course." even though he was thinking his centre was the Isle of Man, which was as far removed from Bowraville as you could get. And if you were Constable Ponty Beaumont you might then write the word "centre" in you notebook, followed by two question marks. You had decided to phone the Kempsey detectives later in the day and they would want to see your notes. Tom O'Donohue watched you and smiled and then

said "With two question marks you can draw love," and seeing your incomprehension he gently reached over and taking the notebook and pen drew the two question marks again, but the first one flipped on its vertical axis, and the second one abutting it. Father O'Donohue explained it was like Alcanter de Brahm's irony mark. The result was a heart with a full point underneath, like a fat exclamation mark. "See?" Tom said, leaning back with his eyes closed, reciting a poem in French -

> La plainte du violoncelle
> gémit, gémit toujours,
> et sa cantilène est bien
> celle du regret des amours.

How does a paddy priest know French? you asked yourself, and you nodded, not understanding at all, but thinking of that Chinese-looking bloke who drove his dead missus all the way from the top of South Arm. Far from the centre, and as free floating as you could get. If that Cha Cha Hu had something to do with all this Father Tom O'Donohue clearly wasn't saying.

Where the road thins out into a mess of tobacco bush and lantana you'd think human habitation would thin out too, but that's not the case. Cha Cha Hu, who was legal, lived there with Maria Taufa, who wasn't, in a wheel-free bus. To get there, you followed the South Arm Road right to the end where there was a ringbarked ironbark and a cluster of African olive trees on the left hand side, all covered in morning glory vine. Soon after that was the fire trail leading to the Horseshoe Road. About three kilometres in would be the old blue Morris Minor parked where the trail widened because the bulldozer had made a drainage ramp. You then walked towards the dead grass trees for about two hundred metres, following the empty water bottles, bits of plastic bag and empty rusting tins of Nemagon until you reached the bus. How they got the bus there in the first place amongst the rocks and trees was a mystery. It was Shire

land, but no-one ever asked them to leave.

As Cha Cha sat and watched Rayleen, he wondered what a successful woman like that ever saw in him. She was younger than him, and her youth and vitality gave her qualities Maria no longer possessed. As he sat, he'd wonder what she was thinking, whether she was thinking of him, or Pete. She always made the bed carefully, no doubt worried about being discovered, and as she made it she would dream of escape, and why it was that it was so easy to talk to a man who hardly said anything, and why it was so hard to talk to a man like Pete, who had a sensible and well voiced opinion on everything. And why was it so hard to talk to either of them now? Sometimes you wait for opportunities that never arrive, so you take what you can.

Cha Cha grew up in West Kempsey, the son of a Szechuan father from Yibin and a Dhungatti mother from Bellbrook. His parents separated when he was little. By looking at him you couldn't tell: he was a vision of an oriental wise man. Even though he finished high school at St Patrick's, being Chinese he naturally couldn't get any work, which is how he ended up living at the top of the Nambucca's South Arm. At least in Bowraville he got the occasional labouring or handyman stuff for the land council at the mish, helping fix up one room cottages so they offered some semblance of shelter.

The land council employed him thinking that to be Chinese in these parts was almost as vexed as being part of the mob. The land council didn't have much going for it in those days, so the work was intermittent – just a few hours a week, nailing back clap boards that had fallen off the huts, unblocking the communal toilet, fixing the one cold water tap that served all the mish, that sort of thing. Father O'Donohue, who had his own tap, his own toilet and even his own shower lived in a tiny house next to St Mary's school. Cha Cha was slashing the kikuyu alongside the school with a clapped out Victa in an effort to discourage the snakes in the grass when he first nodded to Rayleen,

who was having a smoko while leaning against Father O'Donohue's fly-screen door.

Rayleen ran the Royal with Pete. She cleaned Father O'Donohue house and cooked for him on almost a daily basis for extra money she was saving for a holiday, most of the cash secretly going into a small tin under the counter that held her get away fund. The work was easy, and most of the time she was by herself as Father O'Donohue was either up at St Mary's church or next door at St Mary's school, teaching a room full of kids about the Saints, the history of Rome, the deceitful fickleness of the English, and why no-one should believe in any of the nonsense people with unwritten mythologies were prone to. *Anaphabete*, he would mutter to himself.

Once Cha Cha had been merely Cha – as in Chadwick - Hu. His father had named him Li, hoping the name would make his anxious looking son strong and assertive, but that's not the sort of name you could ever use. When Simon Vlotman convinced him that to be happy he had to have "twice as much" at one of Simon's Tu-Ning courses, Cha came to the conclusion he needed to be more assertive, and indeed have twice as much, and the way to do that was to double his first name. When introducing himself, Cha Cha would do this little dance step, and say Cha Cha, spreading his arms wide, as if seeking applause.

Simon, who was determinedly wrong about most things, his mouldering zebra skins by which he would one day make his Australian fortune being a case in point, hit the nail on the bed with Cha Cha. "You have to remember, Cha Cha, that he who hesitates is bossed." Though he looked ruggedly oriental, and even sported a small long beard and braided long hair, the overall effect being of a wise scholar, Cha Cha wasn't a clever man. Cha Cha was the sort of man who wasn't fully engaged with his day to day existence. That was left, by and large, to Maria.

It was Maria who kept the chickens, and kept a vegetable patch. She made wire cages out of chicken wire and pig wire scraps she had taken out of the skip next to the Co-op Hardware store in Belmore Street for the spinach, beans and squashes she grew next to the bus. The cages were necessary so that the wallabies and possums didn't eat the greens, and the snakes, quolls, goannas and dingos didn't eat the chickens. It was Maria who made sure the water bin was full by carrying buckets from the creek. Maria mended their clothes, and washed their blankets and sheets using a plastic detergent bucket and a stick. And it was Maria who managed to cook their meals in a wok on a single burner gas stove they had bought at the Sydney markets years before for just fifty-eight dollars. Maria came from a small place called Hoi in Tonga, and knew a lot about getting by on not much at all.

Cha Cha was affable enough, and when visitors came would have them sit down by the outdoor fire on one of the old car seats, and share a bong. But apart from his occasional work, all Cha Cha really ever did was hum to himself, half smiling as he watched Maria go about her daily chores. Not that Maria minded. Cha Cha was the only man she had ever met who you could say something to without offering an opinion or advice in return.

"You should have been a reverend, Cha." Maria would say to him and tell others. Once in Sydney she had even tried to get him to go to a Free Church meeting, but Cha Cha wasn't interested in religion.

Cha Cha's father ran a restaurant in Kempsey which didn't do so well because most everyone there knew about his family, and you could never tell what was in those Szechuan dishes anyway. Rumour had it you could sell pets at the back door. Over the years his father would sometimes send relief parcels containing dried food, some sauces, and clothing. Occasionally his mother, who was now living at Botany, would send up a

book to read. But Cha Cha didn't care for reading, and Maria was always too tired. The parcels had thinned out to nothing since Cha Cha's mother had died and his father, not able to remember his own name any more, had moved to the Booroongen Djugun nursing home.

It's a hard life living in a bus at the top of South Arm, no matter if you do spend most of your days just sitting in a lichen-covered car seat humming to yourself. Cha Cha looked years older than he actually was. His hair was grey with streaks of white and his clothes were thin. His face and hands were wrinkled, and his chest was sucked in like an old man's. He had a wispy long beard and a way of squinnying at things that made him look wise.

Maria was plumper, something she put down to her Tongan heritage, but she too looked worn. She wore her grey hair in a bob, and although her face and body weren't as aged as Cha Cha she had the stoop of an old woman.

As winter settled in, Cha Cha noticed his wife was taking longer to do her chores and to serve him his meal. She had a bad cough. Even in the Nambucca winters could be harsh, especially the frost mornings, especially if you lived in an old bus.

"Ma, are you sick?" he would bark. She answered by waving her hand and grimacing. It was her way of saying humbug. He told himself she was losing interest in him. If she left, he thought, he wouldn't care.

In the bus they had concocted a bed out of several sheets of plywood stacked on some bricks. On top of the bricks was a mattress Cha Cha had found years before, thrown out on the sidewalk in Carbine Street. He had a job tying the mattress to the roof of the Morris Minor, and taking it all the way up South Arm, but he had done it, and a mattress was better than the old sleeping bags and fern fronds they had used as

bedding before.

At night Cha Cha would listen to his wife cough. Perhaps he should take her to see a doctor. But that would mean having to wash, dressing in clothes decent enough to be seen in, starting the Morris Minor engine, driving all the way into Bowraville, explaining why Maria hadn't brought her Medicare card, and then waiting for hours in a doctor's surgery while Maria was prescribed some pills or whatever, which they would not have the money for, then driving all the way home. And who was to say that the pills or medicine would actually work? Cha Cha had little store in conventional medicine. He believed the cost of prescriptions were one of the ways the government stole back the money it gave out at the unemployment office.

One night when the pauses between showers were long enough for the sky to blaze with stars Maria started to sweat, even though the air was icy. After she coughed, the grey sheet was stained dark. She looked at the stain for a few moments.

"Perhaps I should see a doctor in the morning," she said to Cha Cha, who was awake, but lying on his side. He looked at the blood, but he said nothing. Some things are beyond words.

Later that night, Maria shook Cha Cha awake.

"You've got to see this," she said, pulling at his arm. Her eyes were black and shining.

He hadn't seen Maria this animated in a long time. He followed her outside, where she pointed to the sky. Cha Cha looked up at the gently wheeling stars. It was the first cold night of June, breath-clouding cold. He wished he was back in bed.

"What? What am I looking at?"

"There!" Maria pointed. A streak ran across the sky.

"Huh. A shooting star, so what?"

"Wait, you'll see!"

Cha Cha waited a few seconds, and turned to go back to bed. As he was turning his eye caught the streak of a shooting star. He turned around. Another. And another. A few seconds passed, then there were six at once. A meteor shower. In pulses every few seconds, there was a flood of shooting stars. He thought of how the rain sparkled in sunlit showers.

"That's some meteor shower." Maria turned to him frowning. She coughed horribly for a few seconds before regaining her voice.

"Just look!"

Cha Cha looked again. The sky was ablaze with streaks, but she was right. Behind the streaks the pinpoints of light were - almost imperceptibly - growing fewer as a bank of clouds rolled in off Darkie's Point.

They watched the rain of stars for a few minutes longer before going back to bed. Maria whispered "Don't think I don't know." Cha Cha stared in the darkness. He thought of the slow creak Tom's bed made, and the way Rayleen would talk as they lay together.

"We just talk, Ma. Nothing more. She tells me her secrets." Maria kissed him on the neck. "That's what I'm jealous of," she said, knowing and accepting that jealousy was one of those things Cha Cha had a hard time envisioning, and wondering what secrets there were to tell. She knew Cha Cha would never dream of breaching such confidences.

"Don't you ever want to leave this place? Go somewhere else. Don't you ever want to go back to China?" Rayleen had turned to him and stared into his eyes trying to see the answer. She put her hand on his cheek, half hoping it might be a signal.

Cha Cha had never considered such questions before. "Why would I want to leave? I belong here. This is my home" He felt uneasy that Rayleen had just assumed he had been born in China. His father had tried to teach him Mandarin, but embarrassed by his ethnicity, Cha Cha had refused to learn. "Do you ever want to leave?"

"All the time, Pet. All the bloody time. Just me and …and me, I'd go back home and live with my mum, in Charleville." She held her belly wanting to tell him about the life she had planned for her and her baby, but hesitated. Maybe next time. She'd tell him all about Jude and Pete and what she was going to do and he'd nod his head, just accepting the words, not saying "You should tell the police," or "Pete needs to know." He stroked her head, as a mother would a baby.

In the early morning when the frost was sparkling on the ground, Cha Cha put his arm around his sleeping wife for extra warmth. She was uncommonly cold, and felt wooden. Cha Cha opened his eyes, said her name and gently shook her. And then again, with more force. He sat up on the mattress. She looked for all the word as if she was sleeping, but if you looked carefully you could see that her eyes were open, just a bit, and looking at nothing.

Cha Cha pulled his hair and grimaced. He sobbed and caught his breath. What to do? He could call an ambulance, but how? How would he make such a call? The nearest phone was 20 minutes away by car at the Murrays. Assuming he could get the car started, it could be well more than an hour before an ambulance arrived.

He thought too of calling Bernie Lamont, but it was Sunday, and Bernie would

already be out fishing. He had worked for Bernie once, digging shallow graves in the hard shale of Argent's Hill, and knew that Bernie would be expensive. Cha Cha had often had to use a crowbar to smash a hole in the bottom of coffins that refused to sink in the watery graves he had just dug. He thought of having to dig one more and sobbed. And the money. Funerals cost a lot of money, much more than the few dollars he got from the unemployment office each fortnight.

What to do? The best thing would be to get Maria into Bowraville and work it out from there. He got himself dressed, and dressed her as best he could. It was hard work, because her limbs weren't nearly as pliable as you would expect, and she was a heavy woman while he was a little man. His knees were shaking. The morning was cold, but you could tell it was going to be a hot day. The chickens were in their run bobbing their heads as if to ask why they hadn't been let out yet. Some lyre birds called to each other, imitating the rasping sound the Morris Minor would make. Then one of them started calling out the way Cha Cha would do to Maria "Ma! Ma!" it cried, copying the petulance in Cha Cha's voice exactly. He tried lifting Maria, but realised she was too heavy. He dragged her by the shoulders to the Morris Minor and with a lot of difficulty sat her in the passenger seat, holding her in place with the seat belt. Cha Cha got in the driver's side and turned the ignition key. The car groaned, then stopped. He tried again a few times, but it was no use, the battery was flat. He got out again and stared at the car, scratching his head, feeling sick. Maria sat staring ahead vacantly. If he could just push the car a few feet forward it would start rolling downhill, and he could clutch-start it. He got back in, took the handbrake off and put the car into neutral, got out and started pushing. Even though it was a small Morris Minor, the car was a dead weight, and he had to lean against it with all his might to start it moving. Finally it started moving under its own momentum, and Cha Cha, trotting beside it with his hand on the

wheel, jumped in and pushed it into second. The car jerked and the engine roared. The jerk had moved Maria's head, so she was now, slack-jawed and open-eyed staring at him while he drove.

It was still early morning and Cha Cha had to drive along a steeply snaking road that curled down from the Mistake State Forest. Every so often the rising sun would shine through some clouds and blaze through his windscreen, scattering its light on the scratches, gravel stars and dust. Cha Cha often had to lean out of the car to get a better view of the narrow road in the glare. The morning was cold, but he found he was sweating profusely. A bump in the road threw Maria up and down in the seat so her forehead was now resting against the passenger side window.

As he was driving he began to think he should stop at one of the properties. It wasn't so early now that people wouldn't be up, and it wasn't right that he had to drive his dead wife into town. He imagined himself turning at the Murrays. Andy and Mandy would be on their small veranda drinking their morning coffee in the morning sunlight.

"Ho Cha Cha! Whatcha up to?" Andy would probably say with forced friendliness as he stepped out of the car. Andy and Mandy didn't like Cha Cha or Maria, believing people like them should go back their own countries. "I grew here, but you flew here," Andy would often say, as if it was something profound. Andy and Mandy had the Australian flag and the blue, red and white cross flag of the Australian Freedom Scouts flying from his veranda posts. Andy would nod hello to Maria, staring at him out of the window, and not realise anything was wrong. Mandy, whose eyesight wasn't too good these days, would smile and wave daintily at Maria. Cha Cha would then have to say something like "Andy - it's my wife. She's ... she's ..." Whereupon Andy would take a sip of coffee and spit. He would then grab a corner of the nearest flag and wipe his mouth before saying "Well I guess you'll need to use the phone. But mind you, you're

paying for it. The call and the rental." As he drove, Cha Cha tried saying the words he needed to say out loud. He couldn't. He drove past the Murray paddocks, continuing into town.

He passed Pete Newman - Rayleen's husband - on the side of the road, holding a thick black hose that slithered from his water tanker through a barb wire fence and into a dam. Apart from being the publican of The Royal, Pete was the local fire brigade captain. Maybe there was a grass fire somewhere. Cha Cha smiled wanly to himself at the irony of seeing Pete. Of all people to see. Pete looked up and smiled and nodded to Cha Cha, seeing only his silhouette through the windscreen, but recognising the car. Automatically, Cha Cha raised his hand in greeting and drove on. Pete smiled at Maria as they drove past.

"What do I do?" Cha Cha kept sobbing to himself.

A little way further on he saw Angus MacNisse walking on the road out of town towards his home. As Cha Cha drove closer Angus smiled and raised his hand up and down as if he wanted Cha Cha to stop and have a yarn. Cha Cha kept his eyes steadily on the road trying to ignore him, but watched the look of puzzlement sweep over Angus's face as they went past and he caught sight of Maria.

As he rounded the crest of the Simpson's Ridge turnoff, Cha Cha automatically looked for the view of the town in the distance. But although the morning was bright and sunny, a thick smoky fog hung low over where the town should be. The fog filtered the light with yellows and browns, making the whole landscape look diseased. Soon he could smell it. Not a bush fire, but the acrid smell of burning plastic, rubber and chemicals. It burned his eyes so much that he could feel tears trickling down his cheeks. Cha Cha guessed Burning Mountain had re-ignited, which explained why Pete was using

the tanker on a Sunday.

The way from where Cha Cha and Maria lived into Bowraville is a difficult road, mostly unsealed, and in a clapped out Morris Minor can take some time. It was already half nine when Cha Cha, not even thinking of what he was doing, but thinking of Burning Mountain, turned into Rubbish Tip Road and pulled up a little beyond the St Mary's School. He turned off the engine, and waited, listening to the tink tink of the cooling motor, watching the road behind him in the rear view mirror. He put his hand on Maria's shoulder and squeezed, hoping somehow that there would be some sign of life. There was none.

Eventually he saw Rayleen pull up down the street and get out of her car. She didn't see his car, or if she did, didn't realise it was his, as she went straight to Father O'Donohue's cottage and unlocked the door with a key she fished out of her purse.

Cha Cha got out of the car, and walked towards the cottage. On the other side of the street some people were warming themselves around a camp fire someone had made in the front yard of one of the houses, using an old Chlordane drum.

A young man yelled out, laughing "Hey Cha Cha, you chink bastard! When you going to fix that tap?" Cha Cha smiled and raised his hand in greeting, but walked on. He stood at Father O'Donohue's screen door and knocked politely. It was a Sunday, so he knew Rayleen would be there. Father O'Donohue would be up at the church. Rayleen came to the door, her eyes widening as she realised who it was.

"Cha Cha, you can't - there's too many people around," she hissed, making more of their relationship than existed in Cha Cha's head. Cha Cha was momentarily startled by her appearance. She looked wan, as if the life had been drained out of her. Maybe she had been fighting with Pete again. She was always telling him about the

fights, but never what they were really about. Momentarily, Cha Cha though he should ask how she was, but he had his own problems.

He heard his own voice sound strange, like it was someone else speaking through him.

"Ray - it's Maria," he managed to croak. She looked at his cheeks in wonder. Had he been crying?

"What?"

"In the car," he said, pointing up the hill to the Morris Minor. Rayleen looked towards the car and saw Maria staring at her. She hesitantly waved. There was no response. Rayleen hissed at Cha Cha.

"Holy Mary, why have you bought your wife here? How can you do that? What have you told her about me?"

"She's –" Only then did Cha Cha start sobbing and say the words that said the truth, but they didn't somehow seem real. "She's gone away, Ray."

Rayleen, unlatching the door, dragged him inside, fearful of people noticing she was talking to a weeping Cha Cha.

They sat on Father O'Donohue's bed, Rayleen with her arm around Cha Cha's shoulder as he sobbed.

"She's gone, Ray. She's gone. Holy Jesus, what do I do now?"

"There there, Pet," Rayleen said, but she was crying too, whispering "She's dead," over and over so Cha Cha ended up comforting Rayleen, wondering what was going on, while Rayleen patted his back tentatively, think she had never done such a

thing with him before as pat his back and all the while wondering while immense sorrow washed over her "How do I tell him now?"

Maria had been illegal and Cha Cha had no money but Fathers O'Donohue and McGuigan arranged for her to be buried at Church expense in the Catholic section of the cemetery just half a click down the road. Burning Mountain had at last exhausted itself, and the rain had eased off enough that it didn't fill the two waiting graves, one of which was pathetically shallow and short. Feeling kindly towards the grieving, and perhaps believing Cha Cha's tears were not just for his wife, Father O'Donohue put his hand gently on Cha Cha's shoulder saying "She's home now, Chadwick. She's home now."

Love is Thin

Trying to phrase an answer, Jude Silber turned his head, watching the autumn rain smash against the plate glass window. Each drop became a bullet, just like his dreams. Rain hit with such force that little rivulets slithered down the inside of his head.

Jude's problem - how to answer the man sitting opposite him - wasn't a common one. He was not usually at a loss for words. On the desk blotter he had a list of phrases he could refer to if he was stuck. They often helped. But not this time.

This man hoping for money had no job, unless you could call giving weekend courses in 'Tu-Ning' a job; no assets, unless you could call a heap of old zebra skins that weren't coping too well with the Bowraville humidity and fecund insect life an asset; and no future. Jude was absolutely sure of that.

Jude reached for his hanky again. He was in the business of not lending money, and this man was certainly an ideal candidate for having a loan refused. Jude may not have seen it that way himself, arguing that he had indeed made several loans in his five years as branch manager. Jude saw himself as a fixer. Only last September he had - against his better judgement – bailed out Pete and Rayleen Newman from their financial mess. They ran a pub that could only sell beer from the one brewery, and that brewery had been on strike for months. Pete had originally joked that his was the original Pub With No Beer, but as his customers slipped away the joke had thinned. Rayleen came to Jude in the hope of sorting out the mess. She needed a stay of action from his Building Society just to tide the pub over for a few more weeks. He'd offered to fix the problem, on the understanding that if he was going to do her a favour, she need to return it. "You give favours to get favours, girlie. That's the way it is."" he had said to her when she seemed to be not understanding how business was conducted. He even had a vague

idea he could get her to like him. After all, she wasn't bad looking and he wasn't a bad catch. She could have had a better life with him. It had all been a mistake. Women often were. A good looker like that, but as cold as clay.

That was the trouble with some women, Jude thought, they didn't know a good deal if they fell over one. And he was a good deal. His two wives had initially thought so, even though they soon lost interest, like toys with flat batteries. No zest. Eve would fall to the ground sobbing and quaking dramatically if you even raised your hand in exasperation. He'd never even hit her. He checked up on Rayleen after he had helped her with her car just a month before when Eve had gone missing. Dirt poor as he suspected. A possibility.

Jude's great problem was his two exes. Knowing what Bowraville was like, he was convinced people were talking behind his back, saying it was somehow his fault that Eve and Julia had left him. "First wife does a runner, second wife disappears. You have to wonder." Call me paranoid, Jude thought to himself, but you had to wonder about all those whispering people thinking he couldn't hear what they were saying every time he walked down High Street. People talking, not caring about how he felt, how it was to lose someone you loved. No one stopped to consider how it all affected him. Julia, his first wife, shaking her head slowly with her fists clenched said he needed help. Didn't need help. Just for the whispers to stop. It was everyone else that needed help. Jude was strong. Survived losing two wives, hardly ever sick. That was strong. And here was this pathetic feral hippy, just like everyone else in Bowraville, thinking he'd just splash money out to anyone who asked. What was wrong? Maybe Julia was right. After all, he hadn't heard from her since she'd cleared out. Not a word. Perhaps he was losing control. Just about everyone in Bowraville, including this man, thought he had refused no loans, except for their own.

The voice in his head had some truth. Only recently Jude made the mistake of refusing Jimmy Wells a loan of $20 "until next pension day, so I can buy some groceries." Jimmy of course, had never held a job in his life, and lived in some disused cow bales on the North Arm Road on land that now technically belonged to the Shire, due to some road straightening that never happened. He had no assets, no income, no home, and as far as Jude could see, practically no clothing. In refusing the loan, Jude had given Jimmy $20 out of his own wallet. Stupid old bugger.

Jimmy had immediately taken his money down to The Royal, using it to buy whatever groceries they had for sale there.

"A good man, that Hibiscusland manager," Jimmy said, delicately sipping his Bundy. "I asked him for a loan, and he gave me one."

Patrons at the Royal usually didn't pay much attention to Jimmy, on account he was Jimmy, but a few heads, including Pete's turned slowly when he came out with that observation.

Jimmy's revelation had got people thinking. If Jimmy Wells could snare a loan, why couldn't they? It even got Pete thinking that maybe he and Rayleen should see Jude together, to extend their finances once more, but the mere suggestion got Rayleen so furious the veins in her neck stuck out.

"You're a prize idiot when it comes to money Pete, so don't even think such a crazy thought again. Neither of us are going anywhere near that creep again, you understand?" Rayleen hissed the words, licking her lips with a flick of the tongue before saying "creep."

Pete backed off, not understanding what was going on. "Just a suggestion, Pet,' he said, holding up his palms in surrender and thinking there was no need for Rayleen

to get so angry over just a suggestion.

Although of pioneer stock, Jude felt he was not regarded with the respect one would associate with a Hibiscusland Building Society branch manager. He suspected it had to do with not just the whispers, but also his demeanour and appearance. Jude was a tall, thickly set man who had shaved his head and neck to mitigate against all his hair moving south. His neck was exactly the same girth as his head, so it looked like his head grew directly from his shoulders. He would smile briefly every time he made a statement, as if inviting you to agree with his proposition. He spoke with a very slight Geordie lilt, on account of having worked overseas as a newly minted dentist for some time in North Tyneside. Two prominent canine teeth made his smile both striking and insincere. His skin was almost translucent. Summer and winter, he had his office air-conditioner set at 14 degrees C, because, he'd freely explain to anyone who asked, it helped put the customers off their guard. He liked wearing brown, and during the cooler months, would wear a hand-knitted sleeveless buttoned-up cardigan that Julia had knitted for him, either out of kindness or spite. That's how Julia had described Jude: '"buttoned-up." No wonder things turned out the way they did. Jude didn't think of himself as buttoned up or loopy. If he had to describe himself, he would have said "clean and neat". He had a phrase he kept repeating to himself, sometimes even out loud. "Serious about knowing order." He'd often write its acronym, Sako, on a piece of paper when interviewing customers, giving the pretence that he was interested in what they were saying.

Jude refused most applications for loans. He was just being pragmatic. There were perhaps only three people in the entire town who received regular wages and had any sort of assets behind them. There were also of course the Thumb Creek boys, who rumour had it took their families skiing in Colorado every summer, but they kept a low

profile and never needed loans. The police had initially assumed Eve had stumbled onto one of their plantations, but that line of inquiry had been quickly dropped. Jude was now of the opinion – an opinion he would share in a low muttering voice - that there was some sort of understanding between the police and those Thumb Creek Boys.

All this explained why Jude's answer to the man sitting opposite him was so hard to phrase: If he approved a loan it was often with attached conditions, and the attached conditions for this one were difficult to phrase. Jude looked at this feral hoping for money. He knew Simon Vlotman well. He knew Simon perhaps better than Simon realised. He knew exactly where on the South Arm road Simon had built his hessian, bamboo and cement yurt for himself and Kirsty. He knew of the tatty condition of the zebra skins tacked up on the yurt walls, and which Simon was now trying to offer as collateral. Jude even knew what book Simon was presently reading. It was a water-damaged paperback that Andreas had given him. It had a coffee ring stain on the back cover. The pages were all curled by the damp. He could even recall what was written on the open page: "Mostly it is loss which teaches us about the worth of things."

In the normal course of events, Jude, ever polite, would have told Simon in the nicest possible way that he had no chance of ever getting a loan. Which made his proposed course of action all the more difficult. He was not used to having to search for the words.

"But before we discuss the loan, I have something to confess," Jude said, flashing a brief smile.

"Confess? I thought this was bank manager's office. Not a bloody confessional!" Simon laughed. He was a much younger man than Jude, but wild, from the back blocks. He had long dreadlocked blond hair, and his clothes looked as if they

had been charitably given to him by the Silk People. Jude could not fathom what Kirsty saw in him. She really was a stupid woman.

"This is difficult for me to say, especially given the sorrows you know I've experienced." Simon stopped laughing. He swallowed hard and nodded. Everyone knew of Jude' sorrows.

"You see, I know how you feel. I have felt it."

"Felt what?"

"What you are going to feel."

Simon blinked. He was completely lost. He couldn't help noticing how small and brown Jude Silber's bottom teeth were, and how his canines turned his smile into a grimace. Town gossip was Jude had been a dentist near Coffs Harbour once, but had decided financial services made more money.

"The fact is Mr Vlotman - Simon - the fact is, Kirsty and I - I know lately you have been suspecting something - she herself has told me. I have to tell you that it is me. I'm the one who has been seeing her. I think I love her." There. He had said it. He smiled for an instant. Julia had said he was incapable of love, of even uttering the word but he had just proved her wrong. Stupid bitch. She deserved everything she got, which as far as he could work out, was nothing.

Simon opened his mouth to speak, but didn't. There were a few seconds where the only sound was the rain hitting the window. Jude sniffed his fingers, studying Simon from behind his hand. He could see him trying to control rage. It would soon pass. He was weak.

"You? It was you? My wife has been fucking you? I don't fucking believe it! My

wife? With you?" He pronounced "fucking" like it was "fooking."

The corners of Jude's mouth momentarily turned up. If it was him he'd have opened his car boot and dealt with her. Sako. Serious About Keeping Order.

"Shit. The little tramp. I knew it was someone in town. And so now you can sit there Mr Silber, and tell me smugly that I can't borrow money for my bike. Is that it? Fuck the bike. You see my wife again and I will bloody well kill you."

"On the contrary, Simon. I intend to not only approve your loan, but pay it off for you."

"If he finds us, he'll kill us both," Kirsty had said earlier, lying belly down on the circular bed Simon had built in the middle of the yurt.

Jude ran a finger from the nape of her neck down to the base of her spine. He thought how fragile she looked. She shivered and turned over. She was skinny, but her breasts were large and firm.

"I'm not joking. He's a nasty man."

"Then why don't you leave him?" Jude asked, holding his fingers to his nose. He swept his hand around the circular room. "And this."

"Because he loves me. You can't leave someone who loves you like Simon."

"I love you more."

"Don't tell Simon that. You know he says he killed boys in Rhodesia just for the heck of it. He's not like you, he gets very angry. You better believe it."

Jude did not believe it. Simon looked as if his temper was completely under control. Jude had been married twice. If he had found out someone was shagging his

wife he would have shot them. Simple as that. No questions. That was the difference, Jude thought, between someone like Simon and someone like me. I get things done. Serious about knowing order.

"You are going to pay my loan?" Simon said. "Are you saying Mr Silber you are going to buy my bike for me?"

"Something like that. Any bike you like. I'll approve the loan, and make payments on your behalf for six months. After that I will pay out the rest of the loan for you in one go. The bike will be all yours."

Simon briefly imagined himself on a BMW R1200c, the engine roaring. He had done it hard since moving to Australia. Maybe his luck had turned.

"Do you know how much money the sort of bike I want costs?"

Jude smiled. "I can guess." In fact, he knew exactly the sort of bike Simon wanted. He had seen the magazine tear-outs littered on Simon's desk. He had done his research. It was not as if Simon was augmenting his application with any savings.

"You are not proposing this to say sorry for fucking my wife, I assume?" Simon said.

"No, indeed. Of course I would expect that you tell no-one about this arrangement. Is that agreed?"

Simon hesitated, swallowed, then nodded.

"What I am saying is give your wife to me, and our deal is done."

Simon silently looked into Jude' eyes like he was playing poker. He thought of Kirsty. He thought of how they were married - not exactly legally - at Homelands in a

Tu-Ning ceremony. Simon still regularly went to Thora by the Horseshoe Road, a road that was destroying their ancient VW Kombi. They drove the back road because it was a more scenic drive, and because the Kombi was unregistered. A piece of plywood separated the front passenger's feet from the road. The police, being Constable Ponty Beaumont, hardly ever drove to places like the Horseshoe Road, unless he was out pig shooting with Pete Newman.

Simon also thought of Fern's naked back. Fern lived at Homelands. He sometimes slept with his other students as well. He gave lessons on Tu-Ning. Tu-Ning was all Simon's invention. It basically involved eating raw fruits and vegetables - not cereal grains - and doing nude yoga. Simon often gave private tutorials.

He imagined the scene Kirsty would make. He knew she mucked around, and that Jude was the latest in a string of affairs. She had certainly been lowering her standards to have chosen Jude. She would scream at him if he left, saying she had been betrayed. Probably better to leave without telling her.

"I can't believe that bastard," Kirsty said. "He's moved in with that skinny small-titted wonder at Homelands. And you know how he told me? He left a yellow sticky note on the door. It said "Goodbye" Just that. "Goodbye."

Jude kissed the nape of her neck. It was something he was supposed to do. He had a small but neat flat above the office. She was lying on his leather couch. They had spent the day indoors because of the rain.

"At least we are together, Kirsty my love. Call me paranoid, but I don't want to ever lose you."

Kirsty nodded silently at the words, and stroked the back of his head. The poor man. She knew what Jude meant. She felt she was the only thing between Jude and

grieving despair. Everyone, Kirsty felt, was entitled to some happiness. Wasn't Jude entitled to his?

There are few secrets in Bowraville. You didn't have to be Jude's lover to understand Jude's obsession with losing people. Everyone knew his first wife, Julia, had upped and left in the middle of the night. Jude had been at a meeting at the Macksville branch, and had come home late one night to not only find the flat empty, but all trace of her, after two years of marriage, gone. Her books, clothing, cosmetics. Everything. It was as if she had never existed. The worst part for Jude, everyone thought, was not knowing. She had been talking behind his back about getting up and going for weeks, but no-one expected her to do it like that - so abruptly, so completely. She eventually did get into contact with him through a few terse postcards written in a childish hand that made circles of dots. She had provided a Sydney address, but when he showed the postcards to Constable Beaumont Jude told him he'd never written back. He was having no more to do with her. They'd never even been legally married, he said, which was just as well, because she didn't deserve it.

And then there was his second wife, Eve. Jude sometimes got teary even in company remembering what had happened that day last spring. He and Eve had decided to meet in separate cars for a picnic at a riverside reserve in Talarm on a Saturday afternoon. Eve was to come from Macksville, after doing some shopping, and Jude from Bowraville, along the Rhones Creek Road, after working the morning at the building society. Jude had turned up on time, and had laid out a blanket, and started cooking two steaks on the gas barbecue. Eve never showed up. Hours later Ponty Beaumont told Jude that if he didn't stop shouting and swearing he'd be locked up. And days later, Ponty told Jude that as far as he was concerned Eve was not a missing person. No explanation as to why, or even, if Eve was not missing, where she was

exactly. Just nothing but a couple of coughs to Jude's strident questions. The whole world was against him. It made him think she'd left with Constable Beaumont somehow in collusion, but that would be impossible. He had never even threatened her. Try as he might, Jude could not accept the possibility that she had not only left, but told Ponty Beaumont, that skirt-whipped pile of jelly, not to give him any information on her whereabouts. Jude told anyone who would listen that Eve had gone missing, hoping someone might slip up and give him a clue as to where she was. A lot of people believed him, and believed that Eve had disappeared. There was even talk about the Thumb Creek boys and what they would have done if they had found a stranger wandering around one of their crops. People had gone missing before.

Jude told the story so many times that he believed it himself. And with the nightmares he started to think that maybe he was responsible for her disappearance. He'd wake up some mornings, his pillow damp with sweat, trying to work out if he had or had not dumped her body off that bridge. He was sure Constable Beaumont was suspicious of him. It wasn't just the questions Ponty asked him over and over again. They sounded innocent enough, things like "How are things going for you, mate?" but Jude knew their sinister intention. The man was cunning. He was sure Constable Beaumont had somehow trained some magpies to keep an eye on his flat. Every morning he'd look out and see the prying birds with their gimlet eyes staring at him. How Ponty Beaumont had managed it, he didn't know. But the proof was there, sitting in the guano-covered hibiscus bush that Frypan should have stumped weeks ago. Once, in desperation, he'd opened the window and had flung a coffee cup at them. The bird he aimed at easily hopped out the way before cawing "Confess! Confess!" Constable Beaumont had also been keeping an eye personally on his flat. Jude lived above the Building Society office in High Street, directly opposite the police station, which was on

the high side. Jude's lounge window was in a direct line of sight to Ponty Beaumont's station office. Often when he looked, Jude would see him at his typewriter in the office. Ponty would pause, and look up, looking straight at him, but pretending not to see. Jude was smarter than that. He knew what was going on. Constable Beaumont was trying ever so hard to friendly up to him, and would out of the blue ask him his opinion of women in general, or if he ever spoke to Julia these days. Jude knew it was all just vague suspicions. There was nothing that Ponty Beaumont could prove. But the attention was troubling. Maybe that Rayleen Newman thought she had seen something after all. Women had strange imaginations. He had stopped his car on the empty road in the middle of the HH Mattick Bridge, a mistake he realised now. He had been looking at the swirling eddies of muddy water below the rails when Rayleen had come around the bend doing all of five clicks an hour. She was travelling so slowly he hadn't heard the car engine. But if she had seen or heard anything it could only have been a splash, nothing more. He tried to get her talking as he fixed the tow rope, but she just stood there, her arms crossed in front of her breasts like she was fending off his gaze. She didn't ask any questions as to why he had stopped in the middle of a bridge. As they both stood there, Jude on his haunches fixing the rope to Rayleen's car, they could both hear the water below splash and surge as branches and logs were caught and released on the bridge pylons. If she seen a momentary splash how could she think it was anything but flood water squirming around the pylons? Had she asked why he was standing there in the middle of the road he might have told her. He should have said something there and then. The uncertainty was making him jumpy. He'd told the police it was as if Eve had never existed. She had just vanished. In a way it was understandable. Eve was not the first person to go missing in the wild country surrounding Bowraville.

Jude couldn't understand why it was that he should lose so many people. Had

he done something bad? He was a decent man. A bit plain perhaps, but he had a steady job, and never got into trouble. He had a kind heart. So why was there the need for them to go? He wasn't bad, he was good at his job. Work had recognised his diligence and attention to detail no less than seven times. His branch was even mentioned in the local tourist brochure. He had manager of the year plaques framed above his desk in the downstairs office to prove his worth.

Jude tried not to imagine what it would be like to lose Kirsty. He was paying a lot of money to get Simon out of her life, and so far Simon had stuck to his side of the bargain. Kirsty was furious at Simon, firstly for leaving her so matter-of-factly, and for moving in with some woman at Homelands, and thirdly, for somehow getting the money together to buy the bike everyone was talking about.

At first she didn't mind living with Jude. His flat was small and very neat, but was in the middle of town, and had electricity, running water and a proper oven and refrigerator. He was a bit ordinary compared to Simon, but most men were. If there was anything that she would have changed, it was perhaps Jude's dreams. Often she had to wake him up. He had nightmares, but he would never say what they were about.

Jude wouldn't say what they were about because they were about guilt. In his dreams, the story was always the same. Everyone had discovered the truth, that he had killed Eve. They were after him. Across the High Street from the office was the Bowraville Pioneer Memorial Clock Tower, a tower built of treated pine logs. The project had been funded by a grant from the unemployment office to celebrate the fact Bowraville had been founded by cedar-getter pioneers. It was the cedar trade which had created the township. According to Andy and Mandy Murray from the Frank and Eliza Newman Historical Museum, the cedar trade boom lasted from 1870 all the way through until just after 1871. For almost the first two years of its existence, Bowraville

was a prosperous town. The trade collapsed in October 1872 when the cedar getters realised they had in fact got everything, and moved on. Bowraville had been on hard times ever since.

In his dream, Jude would climb the clock tower and hole himself up in the clock house. Load his Sako and wait for them to come.

Peering out through a hole in the number six of the clock face Jude would watch the town go about its daily business. Eventually someone - usually Constable Beaumont, but just as easily Jesus Fernandez or even Father O'Donohue, would notice he was sitting up there, and call out to him, saying everyone knew and that he should just give himself up. Jude wouldn't answer, but just wait. Eventually a group of people would form around the base of the clock tower asking him to come down. Still he would wait, the metal of the Sako growing warm in his hands. After a while someone - Constable Beaumont of maybe Pete Newman with his Volunteer Fire Brigade helmet on, would get a ladder and climb up with the intention of forcing him to come down. He would wait until they were peering in at eye level to the clock house, wondering how to get him out, before he would aim. He would scream as he reloaded. Then the scene would change without logic, as they do in dreams. He was standing on the Mattick Bridge, alone, peering at the swirling brown waters beneath him, thinking of Julia who had left him, of Eve who had disappeared, or maybe he had killed her, both women standing like ghosts in front of him silently mouthing their disgust at his being. In such dreams, he loathed himself, and would take the Sako out of the car, and leaning backwards over the rail kick off a shoe so he could press down the trigger with his toe.

Kirsty worried about the screaming. There was something wrong with this man. Maybe it was his loses. She had initially enjoyed mothering him, but was now starting to think the relationship was a mistake. It didn't happen every night, but many nights she

had to wake him. "Shh," she'd say. "It's just a dream. It's over now. Go back to sleep, baby. Shh."

Jude worried about the dreams too. He wasn't a violent man. Why such violent dreams? And he actually liked Ponty Beaumont, despite the worry that the man was starting to form the wrong idea. Jude knew he was much smarter than Constable Beaumont, but genuinely enjoyed their conversation. Jude found him to be a font of information on topics like the causes of domestic incidents, right through to the leading causes of fatality among young men on the Mid North Coast.

"Reckless driving, mate. You give a young man a 1200cc bike and it's practically guaranteed on these roads he'll end up dead or in a wheelchair. Just takes a few months."

Kirsty lived with Jude for weeks. The weather turned cooler, and the rain eased, so that most days it was just gentle showers. Simon never contacted her, not even a postcard. She heard about him from time to time. There had been a scene at Homelands when some men had tried to join one of his courses. And there was a rumour that one of the Homelands girls - not the one he was living with - was pregnant. And of course everyone talked about the bike. In the Nambucca and Thora valleys where most of the transport was old unregistered cars held together with bits of timber and fencing wire, a new BMW R1200c was from an alternate reality.

Try as he might to maintain Kirsty's interest in him, Jude soon realised he was losing her. He was quite content spending his evening at home with a pot of tea, listening to the talk shows on Radio Nambucca. But Kirsty always wanted to drink and watch television shows in which ordinary people did interesting things. Her favourite was where a group of young people were left alone for ages inside a sealed house. Two

of the people were stooges. Their job was to seduce everyone else. As soon as you were seduced, you were out of the house and off the show. No-one in the house knew who the stooges were. On the nights that Jude did go out, he always said he had "business" to attend to, making it clear that Kirsty couldn't come.

One Saturday night Kirsty suggested that she and Jude go to the Royal for drinks. Against his better judgement, he agreed.

The night was cool, but not so cold that you couldn't sit on the veranda. Kirsty would have preferred to be indoors. Jimmy was telling one of his crazy stories to Gilberta, and Kirsty wanted to listen in, but Jude couldn't stand the smoke.

They sat, quietly drinking a glass of Riesling, when all of sudden Kirsty squealed with delight, stood up, and started frantically waving to someone on the street.

Jude turned and looked. It was Simon, getting on his bike. A dark-eyed girl in leathers, so skinny she might have been a boy, was standing next to him, getting ready to get on a Yamaha that had seen better days.

"Oh Simon, hey! How you doin' Darl?" Kirsty cooed.

Simon looked up and grinned. He turned to the girl and said something. She stared at Kirsty for a few seconds, sat on her bike, kicked the engine and took off slowly, using her feet to steady the bike, heading down the street towards North Arm, before revving it at full throttle.

"Kirsty!" Simon said. "Jude! You both are looking well". But he didn't look at Jude, just Kirsty.

Later that night, Jude heard Simon's motorbike in the street below. It sounded like a primeval monster clearing its throat.

"That bloody idiot," Kirsty laughed. "He'll wake up the entire town. I'm getting a drink of water. Do you want one?" Jude shook his head, lay on his back and stared at the ceiling.

When he got up in the morning, there was nothing to clean up. She'd taken everything, absolutely everything of hers from the flat. Jude had to answer phone calls from her friends, explaining she had left, probably for Simon. No, they hadn't had a fight. Yes, he believed she had left him. Yes, he would phone as soon as he had some contact details.

The next day was a Monday and it was only then that Kirsty was reported missing. Joanie Phale rang Constable Beaumont saying she was concerned as she and Kirsty always did Steiner humming together on a Monday, but Kirsty hadn't turned up. It was assumed by most people that Simon and Kirsty had gone off together somewhere, Kempsey perhaps, even though Simon's girlfriend - the one on the bike - said he had taken Kirsty back to Homelands, and that Simon and Kirsty had a massive row before they both disappeared.

A couple of days later Constable Beaumont finally managed to track down Simon Vlotman, or at least his bike. It was strewn along a fifty metre stretch of the Horseshoe Road. There was no sign of a body.

Constable Beaumont now listed both Simon and Kirsty as missing persons. The realisation that Kirsty was definitely missing was devastating to Jude, who sitting at his desk would almost break out in sobs. They always left, every one of them.

"Oh dear, it's happening all again," Jude, trying valiantly to hold back his tears, said to Constable Beaumont. Constable Beaumont, Jude noticed, was using his best friend technique, listening attentively to anything he had to say, while reporting on

Simon's bike. Jude could guess exactly what Constable Beaumont was thinking. But Constable Beaumont persisted.

"We're getting the dog squad in to see if they can locate him. Fancy riding a bike like that on the Horseshoe Road. You would have to be suicidal. I wonder how he managed to afford it." Constable Beaumont leant in, lowering his voice. "He wasn't legal you know. And as for K…" He nearly went on to say he was now sure Kirsty wasn't just missing, but something bad had happened. He stopped himself just in time. He wanted to hear Jude's opinion on things. All Jude really needed, he felt, was a chance to talk to someone.

Sensing an uncomfortable intensity to the conversation, Jude nodded, and took out a handkerchief to dab his eyes. Constable Beaumont watched him intently. Jude could see that Constable Beaumont was only pretending to look concerned, He was after a confession. Constable Beaumont leant across the desk and put his hand on Jude's shoulder.

"It's alright mate, it's alright. I know it must be so hard. But I'll keep an eye on you."

In a Strange Land

"Same old same old," said Tamar, packing her day neatly into four words and using her worn sleeve to delicately pat the Madeleine crumbs from her mouth.

Andreas nodded to say he knew the stuck-in-a-hole feeling. Hellersdorf had been like that. Balmain was becoming like that. He wanted to go back to North Arm, but he wanted company as well. Watching the crumbs part from her beautiful lips, he thought the company could be Tamar. She was beautiful, and she always dressed with class.

Andreas had spent the last six months helping Helmut renovate a terrace. The job was done. Helmut had stopped paying him. Sydney was expensive and dangerous. He wanted to go back. Perhaps she would go with him.

"Move up with me," he said, reaching for her hand. Tamar said nothing, just stared at the crumbs on her napkin, her hand limp in his. Andreas pretended not to notice, and kept squeezing hers gently.

"Money is not a problem. I make good dough. And the valley is beautiful. The nature is quiet and green. People are so free there, not imprisoned by all this city *Scheisse*." He spat the last word out so forcefully that a little fleck of phlegm landed on their hands. They both pretended not to notice.

Tamar and Andreas had been sharing Andreas's bedroom at Helmut's house for the last few weeks. Tamar told him she loved it that the DDR flag pinned to Andreas' wall had the same colours as her own. She told him it was proof they had a spiritual connection.

Andreas believed himself to be a focussed, sensitive and good listener. Nothing

like Helmut. Helmut was a bit off the air, spending hours straightening bent nails and collecting old planks from construction sites. What was the *Englisch* expression? He had his head in the cows. His terrace, a two-bedder on the point road, was beautiful or would have been if not for the piles of stuff stacked everywhere.

Tamar had lived at Missabotti for some short time years before. Her parents, both teachers, worked at Nambucca Heads for a year before being transferred out west. It had been paradise. And now the way Andreas spoke made it seem magical, a place where you could unwind and breathe again. She wanted to go to Melbourne first, put a few things in order, and then fly up. Andreas would meet her in Coffs in a few weeks' time. Tamar thought that Andreas was one of the few men she had ever met who understood what she was saying. The way he tilted and nodded his head when she spoke was proof enough, she thought, of the import he gave her every word.

Andreas' Bowraville house was a small shed made from ripple iron stitched together with six gauge next to the river on Miriam Donovan's land. He had another house and ten acres right up North Arm, but had more or less given the property to Gilberta, who wasn't strictly legal, and needed a helping hand. When he got back he realised there were going to be a few problems with Tamar moving in. The shed was not an ideal home, though he knew of couples who lived in far worse. Anna and Ivan lived in an upturned water tank on the adjoining property and seemed OK. Jesus and Mary had lived in two caravans for years. And then there were the Silk People, a small nomadic group who lived in tepees spun from spider webs. Miriam would sometimes let them camp on her land. Still, he could do better than a shed. He wanted to impress. He had saved up some money. And he was good with his hands. Perhaps he could afford a shipping container.

"Can deliver a 40-footer to you el cheapo, mate. In pretty good nick. There's

only one hitch."

Andreas had gone into town to make some phone calls. This one sounded promising. Maybe he could afford it.

"And so what is this hitch?"

"Full of ruined books. You sort out dumping them, and that container's yours with twenty five per cent off."

Andreas had the 40-footer delivered from Coffs, and positioned exactly where he wanted it, on a rocky outcrop overlooking a small field bounded on one side by the Nambucca and another by a grove of camphor laurel trees. He had made some stumps by half burying old Chlordane drums and filling them with cement. On the side of the container in big white letters was written the words "Hamburg Süd" which made him smile. It took him a while to work the door bolts loose. When he finally coaxed the doors open he found the container packed with musty cardboard boxes of water-damaged second-hand books. Hundreds of boxes, each stamped with the word "Bertelsmann". He managed to stack about 20 boxes of books in the paddock before giving up for the day. He literally had a truck-load of books to shift.

The next morning Miriam Donovan knocked on his shed door. Andreas's shed and container were parked on Miriam's land. She lived in the old homestead on the other side of a small hill. In return for living on her land, Andreas kept an eye on the fences, many of which had disappeared into the river now that it had changed course, and helped with drenching the cattle.

"Andreas! You need to help me. One of the Charolais is sick." Miriam was a thin bony woman with eyes like a Jersey. Her reasons for living were to look after a small family of donkeys, who she adored, and to enter her prize Charolais cattle into the

Bowraville and District Annual Agricultural Show. Among the webs in her unpainted mahogany lined living room were festooned the red and blue ribbons of previous victories. She spent most of her days hoeing thistles and talking back to talk-back radio, which lived whispering in one of her ears via a miniature transistor. Her talking back was always in the fields. People said she talked to her cows.

Andreas followed her towards the dam where a creamy white cow sat. Miriam's Charolais were normally skittish, but this one let both go right up to her.

Andreas scratched in the hollow at the back of the cow's skull, the way cows like. He remembered that English saying: a herd in the hand is worth two in the bush. The heifer looked dolefully up at him, and then vomited copiously, not bothering to move its body. The vomit was sludgy grey and smelt of grass and sugar. Some of it seemed to have straight edges. Andreas sat on his haunches and peered at it. There was type amongst the goo. He thought he could make out a word. *Recherche*?

"This seems to me she has eaten of something she should not have." he said. "Probably she will get over it in one day or two. You should just make sure she has some water with a bit of molasses."

Miriam nodded.

"I see your new container has turned up. Should be an improvement for you. By the way, you haven't seen my radio? I've dropped it somewhere."

Andreas made a corral out of star stakes and pig wire so the cattle couldn't get in, and moved the boxes there. He spent the rest of the day stacking more boxes from inside the container. It was hard work. It was the beginning of autumn, but the air still had the bite of summer. By noon the air was cloying damp and hot. Every now and then he'd break open a box to see what sort of books were inside. They were mostly

novels, and a lot of self-help books. Sometimes he would come across a philosophy book, and if it wasn't too damaged he'd take it inside, thinking it might be something for Tamar to read. He also kept a few German authors, even though they were in translation.

He stacked about 100 boxes into the corral. Miriam would probably evict him if she knew he had been poisoning her cattle with literature. Maybe he should just chuck the lot in the river. He shook his head at the thought. If the *Bowraville Argus* was to be believed, and most people said it wasn't, the river was already polluted enough downstream. The newspaper wrote that the river downstream of Bowraville was so polluted not only was it not safe for swimming, it was not safe to go near. He thought about burning the books. Burning them made a lot more sense, as he was in constant need of fuel for his small wood stove.

He had shifted the wood stove from the shed just the day before. The stove was positioned right next to the door of the container. Any further in and the whole container would become an oven. Andreas used it to bake *Bauernbrot*, which he sold at the Community Markets. To make bread well, you needed fuel that burned slowly and evenly. Not too hot. He'd give the books a try.

As he worked he noticed the sick cow had come over to see what he was doing. She seemed better already, but wasn't grazing, just looking at him and chewing her cud as he piled the books alongside the container. It was unnerving having the cow watch intently. It was like she knew what he was doing. Andreas put down another box of books, and using it as a stool, sat down to catch his breath.

The cow made a noise like someone clearing her throat.

"She doesn't belong here," said the cow as it chewed its cud. Andreas stared

back.

"Was that you? Did you speak?"

The cow said nothing, but went on quietly chewing, its jaw moving silently sideways as if it was working up to say something.

"I must be going mad. I would have sworn the cow said something," Andreas muttered to himself. Perhaps he was dehydrated.

"My point is she'll end up just like that girl in Berlin. You remember her don't you? What was her name?"

Andreas stared slack jawed. Not only did the cow speak to him, but was discussing a secret he'd never told anyone as if it was common knowledge. The voice was ethereal and beautifully modulated. A wonderful speaking voice, but one that sounded tiny and far away. It was deep, almost like a man's voice. It had a slight lisp perhaps, but one that was hard to detect, and probably a result of having no upper front teeth, or chewing while speaking at the same time.

"You can speak!"

The cow drooled, and languidly slid a thick blue tongue into one of its nostrils, flicked it around, and then continued chewing silently.

"I heard you. You can speak!" Andreas repeated.

"You will grow tired of ... her ...Will you do it again?" the cow said.

This time it was Andreas's turn to be silent. He knew exactly what the cow was talking about, but refused to admit it.

"You say she'll leave, but how would you know? You know nothing of my

relationship with Tamar, nothing at all. You know nothing of me. And you have never even met her! How can you say you know these things?"

"I know how these things work. I've chewed the ... cud on this quite a bit. *Wir sind alle Fremde in einem fremden Land.*" Andreas didn't even notice the cow had changed tongues.

Andreas tried to ask more questions, but the cow remained silent. Eventually she sat down in the shade of the container quite close to where he was working. He watched her intently, but after a while she stopped looking at him, and closed her eyes for minutes at a time. Sometime later, with some heaving and snorting, the cow got up, and walked slowly over to where the rest of the herd was grazing.

Naturally, Andreas said nothing about the talking cow to Miriam. And he decided it was against his best interests to say anything when he picked Tamar up from Coffs Airport. She looked radiantly beautiful – long glossy black hair and an intelligent inquiring face. Just for the occasion she was wearing a classy grey silk dress with deep blue trim, more appropriate for a cocktail party in the city than Andreas' old ute.

"Are you sure you want to be here?"

Tamar laughed. She wasn't the least bit sure, but she wasn't going to tell Andreas that. Andreas had worked hard to make a little home out of his new shipping container. He'd even managed to build a small deck overlooking a gully and the Nambucca, where they could sit at night once the weather warmed up.

"Such a beautiful place." She kissed him. It wasn't the answer he was looking for.

For a while, things seemed to go smoothly. Andreas burned books in the Aga,

baking bread. He had come across a case of Thomas Mann, in English translation, which burned particularly well. It was strange how different books burned in different ways. Burning Nietzsche was next to impossible, even though all the pages were completely dry. An entire case of D.H. Lawrence remained damp no matter what he did. Andreas had even taken to placing the books on the steel roof of the container during the daytime to help dry them, but after weeks *Sons and Lovers* not only remained damp but mould had begun to grow across the pages. He would have to dig a pit and compost them. But for the most part the wood stove was well-fuelled and Andreas's bread baking business boomed. He left the container doors propped open because of the heat and the fumes. As autumn slowly wheeled into winter Andreas and Tamar would lie in bed listening to the croaking frogs, the soft call of owls and the night song of blackbirds, the darkness filled with life, and feeling the cool night breezes tempered by the heat of the cooling stove.

Life settled into a quiet routine. Tamar always smiled, forever saying how different the Nambucca was to either Sydney or Melbourne, but Andreas couldn't get the cow's words out of his head. And although she didn't say anything, Tamar was having second thoughts. She had been in town, shopping at a second hand clothing store, when another customer, clearly someone from the alternate community, looked up and down Tamar's smart grey dress and said.

"From the city." It wasn't a question, but a wistful statement of fact. Tamar smiled at the woman, noticing her thin cotton dress, ragged woollen jumper, and worn rubber thongs. She was not much older than Tamar, but had dirty blonde hair and either mud or a large scab on one of her knees. Tamar introduced herself. "I used to live here, out at Missabotti. About ten years ago."

The woman said she was Mary while hugging herself, as if to protect from the

cold. "Hazy - he's my bloke - and me moved here hoping things would be better. It's a nice place, but you should've stayed away. There's no point to staying here."

Certainly Bowraville was not quite as Tamar had remembered it, and she didn't want to end up looking as poor as this Mary. More down at heel, more dispirited. Could she really live here? And Mary wasn't the only one. Andreas had taken her to the pub to meet a German friend of his who seemed a little off the air. As Andreas and his friend – Gilberta was her name – were talking and joking in German, the woman behind the bar had said much the same thing. "A girl like you shouldn't stick around here, Pet," she had said. "This place gets you after a while. You keep on thinking you can leave, then one day you wake up and find you can't."

One June morning Andreas got up early, and put his gumboots and Drizabone on. The air was sharply acrid, but cold enough for breath clouds. He guessed Burning Mountain had re-ignited. There was a thick frost on the grass. A mist – or perhaps smoke from Burning Mountain – swirled through the trees. He walked over to the camphor laurel grove and looked around. It was still too dark to see properly, but he soon spotted the herd, their thick white coats giving them the appearance of ghosts in the gloaming. The entire herd, about twenty breeders as well as a few calves and heifers, were sitting under a thicket of trees where it was a few degrees warmer than the open paddock. He trod carefully, his boots not even crunching the frost. Even so, they sensed him. They all turned their heads his way to watch him come.

Even though they were Charolais, not one of them stirred or showed the least sign of agitation. Andreas got up so close he could almost reach out and touch them. He smelt their sugary breath. He realised he had no idea which of the cows was the one who spoke to him.

"Which one are you?"

The cows said nothing. A few were chewing cud, but several more weren't even doing that.

"One of you spoke to me. I heard you!"

Some of the cows didn't even seem to be looking at him anymore, but through him, like he was invisible. It was an unnerving feeling.

"You need to explain yourself. Why do you say we don't belong? This is my home! What have I done? Why won't you speak to me? It won't happen, you know. It won't happen."

"Andreas?" There was a catch of concern in the voice. Andreas looked from cow to cow, trying to work out which one had uttered his name, realising too late that the voice had come from behind him. He turned around.

Silhouetted by a dawning sun pinking her ears, Tamar stood at the edge of the grove, holding out a hand as you would if helping someone over a stream.

"Tamar?"

"Andreas, what are you doing? Who are you talking to? Is Miriam there? Are you talking about me?"

Andreas was silent for a few seconds trying to work out what to say.

"No no. No-one is here. I was checking on the cows. I was clearing my throat."

Tamar came closer, looking around. It was clear she didn't believe him. Andreas knew he had to act. It was Berlin all over again.

That night, while they were sitting around the wood stove burning some Günter Grass, Tamar, staring at the fire, burst into tears.

"Look, it wasn't Miriam. You must believe me."

"Who were you talking to then?"

Andreas didn't know what to say.

"I was talking to myself."

Tamar started sobbing more. Andreas felt like strangling her. How could she be so stupid as to believe he and Miriam had a thing going? Some people were so child-like, Andreas thought, they sometimes confused love and hate.

There was no point arguing this. "Tam, maybe you should go back to Sydney for a while. Think things over. If we split, so be it. It's better we try to remain friends than later on become enemies." He didn't want to hate her. Not like he hated Tulpen by the Landwehr canal. He had watched with some satisfaction as she had cried while he explained why he was splitting. It was always better that he did it first.

Tamar sniffed and patted her eyes with her sleeve.

"It is Miriam isn't it? That's who you were talking to."

Andreas opened his mouth to say the truth, but thought better of it. He nodded sagely. "Yes, you are correct. It is Miriam."

Tamar said nothing. She wanted to be more upset, but she also wanted to get away. She had no real friends here apart from Andreas and Miriam. In the city the land was so smothered you couldn't feel it through your feet. But here it felt sullen and resentful. He offered to drive her into Macksville early next morning so she could catch

the train back to Sydney. That night Andreas slept on the roof of the shipping container, and then, when it started to rain, climbed down and slept in his ute.

The next morning when he returned from Macksville, Andreas saw one of Tamar's bags had been forgotten. It was still there in the container, under the bed. It couldn't be left. He took it down to the roaring flooding river, and heaved it angrily into the water. The bag floated for a while, swiftly carried by the current, before it started sinking. Later on he realised the sensible thing to have done was to take the bag to the train station and send it on, but it was too late for that now. Besides, the swollen river would carry it out to sea in a matter of hours. He didn't really care.

Later that night, alone in his container, Andreas started to feel bad about the whole situation. Perhaps he should have handled things differently. It all seemed so hopeless. Why had he done it?

After a few hours the moon rose. The container doors were open as usual. Unable to sleep, Andreas put on his gumboots and walked towards the camphor laurel grove. The river roared. The moon was heavy. The light cast strong shadows across the fields. A flicker of shadow made him look up. A cloud, but perhaps not. A cloud that if you half closed your eyes you could believe was the silhouette of Anna Platonov, skirts, boots and all, flying across the moon's face as if on the zenith of a giant leap.

Andreas felt sick. Something was happening to his brain, he was sure. He was seeing too much when he looked at things. He imagined looking down on himself from the height of the Anna cloud. Would he look important? He remembered what he'd said to Tulpen in Berlin, and quickly forgot it again.

This time he recognised the Charolais who had spoken to him. It was the way she was chewing her cud. She'd move her jaws from side to side for a few seconds then

stop, then start again.

"Why did you tell me to leave her?"

The cow looked up at him exactly the same way Tamar did when she was asking him to explain why she should leave.

"I know it was you. You told me when I was taking books out of the container. I know it was real. You told me."

The cow swallowed and lifted its head as if to say something. Andreas waited. The Charolais, its head held high, bellowed so loudly that the sound echoed through the night. It was a cry of sorts, the sound a cow makes when it has lost its calf, or is calling for a bull. An elemental sound so loud and forlorn that for a second or two Andreas wasn't sure if it was him, the flooding river, or the cow that was making all the noise.

Anna Be Quick

At the beginning of the winter floods when Ivan Platonov was away again, Anna reckoned she should do something about the teeth grinding. She knew what. In the grounds of the Central School were several old pine trees, perhaps planted by that pioneer William Scott himself, as sorry for all those cedars he'd hacked out. Every morning, while herding Tibby and Kayla to Mrs Ringland's classroom, she would walk past the pines, keeping a watchful eye on the bulging and spiky white bulbs erupting from the ground underneath. They grew fast. In a matter of days they had large red caps with white spots, the sort you see in story books.

One Friday morning they were ready. It had been raining so heavily Lane's Bridge was closed, and the North Arm Bridge barely passable. Taking a little curved knife from her pockets, Anna took in her harvest. Jesus, leaning on the school fence, his white dress and long black hair still dripping from walking across the river, watched her as she carefully cut them close to the ground and placed them on her skirt, which she held up to make a basket.

Anna looked Jesus up and down, wondering why he was interfering. She noticed the blood on his bare feet. "Your foot. It's bleeding," she said, but he didn't even look down.

"Don't eat those," Jesus said, wagging a finger at her. "They'll kill you. What you want are the little golden ones that turn blue when snapped. You want the sort that grow in the Noble paddocks. The gold tops. Not these. *No es bueno*."

Anna ignored Jesus. Every one suspected he was illegal, and she didn't like the way he'd have an opinion on just about anything, just like Ivan, and then tell you at least half the opinion in lingo. Jesus knew nothing about such matters. Just because he knew

a lot about most subjects didn't mean he was expert in any, even though just about everyone else in Bowraville assumed it did. Anna didn't want to dream. She didn't want to imagine. She wanted anger. She wanted to do things.

Anna reckoned she was an Arlovski girl from Minsk, but some reckoned she was also a Kneebone girl from Burnt Bridge. She never knew her mother, who had died when she was two. Her daddy was a sleeper-getter in the Macleay Gorges. He came from Russia with his mother, who would sit Anna on her knee, stroking her blonde hair, telling her stories of walking through birch forests in hazy late summer twilight searching for those red and white balls. She warned Anna to boil the magic out. "If you do not Myshka, then you will be - Petya what is word for *neistovyy*? - *Da,* berserk!"

Now Ivan, he was a piece of work. It wasn't the hitting so much as the threat. True, Anna sometimes wore shades at night, but the bruises that stayed were from words. He'd use words like knives. Rumour was he had a past, and maybe was Italian or Russian, but Joanie Phale, who knew more about some people than they knew about themselves, said he actually came from Queensland. No one ever asked Ivan, because he looked like the sort of bloke who didn't like being asked questions. So no-one knew for sure whether Anna and Ivan were legal or not, though the amount of time that Ivan spent travelling suggested he had to be, and the fact that Anna, who had children to mind, never went anywhere, suggested maybe she wasn't.

Back home, she sliced up her harvest, and put it on paper on a metal tray under an old, car windscreen that was lying in the paddock. In just a few hours the sliced toadstools shrivelled to almost nothing. She filled an old coffee jar with the dried slices and securely stopped the lid. She was set. All she needed now was dark. Doing what she wanted to do by day would attract too much attention. People would talk. Her children would notice. Ponty Beaumont might get involved. She had to be careful, discrete.

Otherwise it would be difficult to do what she wanted to do.

Anna waited until her children had been fed their banana cake for supper and were sleeping. She walked down to the creek and selected a handful of small white pebbles which she put in a skirt pocket, and dug a handful of white clay out of the creek bank. She then cleared some rubbish away and sat down, resting her back against a she-oak, and took out several slices of toadstool wrapped in paper. She ate them slowly, chewing each bit carefully. She waited. While she waited, she fashioned a little statue of Ivan, sitting on a Paraquat tin. You could tell it was Ivan because his legs were spread far apart, an imperious Samurai. Ivan always sat like that, like he was ready to take on the world, or tell Anna what to do.

After a while, she could feel herself becoming lighter. It was time. Anna rose, and walked over to the Noble paddocks, which gently sloped down to the North Arm Road. They were already starting to frost. She started running downhill, slowly at first. As she ran, she started leaping. The leaps became longer and longer, more a pushing off from the earth than a fall, until she found she could float many yards before kicking her heels again.

Satisfied with her progress, Anna returned to the creek. In a circle of she-oaks she put down her clay figure, and kicked her heels. She soared above the tree canopy, took out her pebbles, and shied stones at the figure before gently settling to earth again. She flicked her wrist as she threw the stones, throwing like a man.

"Heeya!" she cried, as a pebble landed near the statue. She kicked her heels and soared once more.

"Take that, you bastard," she growled.

Tibby, who was supposed to be sleeping, saw all this. Tibby and Kayla's yurt

was made from fibreglass insulation batts and bits of tin. Years before Ivan had bought a kit home at the Royal, but had had some difficulty with the instructions, in that they demanded more labour from him than he was willing to give. He built the yurt out of bits and pieces of the kit. His and Anna's bedroom was an upturned water tank set on dry stacked brick piers, and tied down to nearby trees with rope. The rest of the house was on wooden pallets that had lantana and tobacco bush growing through. Old Herboxone and Paraquat tins were used as stools and tables.

Tibby waited in her bed, listening for the sounds of her mother crawling under the tank to her own bed. But the sounds never came. Her mother was up to something. Curious, she crept out, and silently followed. She saw Anna in the clearing, hopping over the little lump of clay, shying stones at it. She never knew her mother was that agile, especially as she was still wearing her gumboots. Thinking her mother had finally flipped, she stole back to bed, wondering what would become of her and her little sister now.

The next night, Anna crept off again, but Tibby didn't follow, preferring the comfort of her bed to the craziness of her mother. Anna picked up her stones, ate her toadstools slices and waited. There would be no practicing tonight. Tonight she would fly.

As soon as she felt the toadstools working Anna stood up, and with a mighty kick of her heels soared into the air. She floated still for a few seconds, and then leaning forward, started moving to the north west, slowly at first, but getting faster. She knew where she was going.

Every so often, Ivan would go off somewhere, leaving his family to fend for themselves. Anna had no money, and no income. Everything she bought she bought

with money that Ivan gave her from an immense roll he kept in his pocket. She had no idea where all the money came from. Usually he said he was off to Kempsey or Coffs Harbour for a few days. Once he left for weeks for a walk down the Danube. And this time he said he was going somewhere like Italy, for weeks.

"I'm off to Roma," Ivan had said. He smacked the word Roma between his lips, trilling the R. "Spending some time with an old friend." This was true. Ivan had met Ray while both were killing time in Lithgow. Ray's story was he had been a vineyard worker in Roma and said he'd nearly got married, kid and all. But the one person he'd ever truly loved didn't want to know about him anymore. She hadn't even let him see the baby before adopting it out.

"There's tarbrush in the family, mate," Ray had said to Ivan, while tattooing him with a darning needle he's somehow smuggled in. The tattoo, across the back of Ivan's neck, in Gothic lettering, said AUSTRALIA FOR AUSTRALIANS. "I didn't find out until the old man died, found out he was part of the local mob. We're called Mandandanji. Therese must've found out. That's why she left. People did that sort of shit in them days." Ray had grown up thinking the mob was for other people, but now had a red, yellow and black flag in his cell. "At least I know who I am now," he'd say. That was decades ago, and Ray had been on the down ever since. He was in Lithgow for break and enter, a charge which Ivan thought was the story of Ray's life. Ivan had been in briefly for cultivation and possession. Ivan reckoned his friendship and intermittent visits to Roma were the only thing standing between Ray and a stint in Westbrook.

Anna couldn't guess any of this. She didn't know why Ivan wanted to go off to Rome to visit an old friend, and nor could she ask.

"You'll have to give me some money for food. Tibby needs a new dress." Anna had other, unstated concerns. A lot had been going on in Bowraville lately. She felt very alone. All she had was an uncaring husband, two small children, and not even a proper house. She wondered if this was how the unknown mother everyone had been talking about felt.

"I can't give you any, Na. I need it for my trip. You want money, get a job." It was an old conversation that Ivan always won. There were no jobs in Bowraville.

"But Ivan, for God's sake, what will we eat?" Anna knew the answer to that question before she even uttered the words. Bananas. Ivan would make them eat bananas.

Ivan had six acres of bananas on the north-facing slope where they lived. He'd get his kids to spray them with Paraquat, and occasionally he'd fertilize them with Amgrow too, but it made no difference. What bananas grew were small and spotty. Often the agents would reject his entire crop. When that happened he would simply stop giving Anna money and make her and the kids eat them. He often called her Na, and smirking at his own joke would say before leaving, "They are supposed to be really good for you, Na. Na!"

Just about everyone in Bowraville knew when this happened, and more often than not when Anna walked to the North Arm road to collect her mail, she found tins of food and packets of biscuits in the mail tin, or even a basket of food and clothing sitting by the tin, covered in a cloth to keep the flies out. Every time she saw the kindness, tears would come to her eyes from gratitude, but also from terror. Anna lived in fear of Ivan coming home one day and finding she'd been getting handouts. If Ivan suspected she was a sponger, there was no telling what he'd do.

Still, Anna believed it was her husband's duty to look after her, not the duty of an entire town. Stones would be cast. Friend in Rome indeed. One of his girlfriends, no doubt. She'd make him hop, skip and jump when she caught up with him.

The night air was cold, especially given the altitude and speed Anna was travelling. She had planned for this, and wore long woollen socks underneath her skirts. For a top she wore two of Ivan's old chequered shirts, a pullover and a cardigan. On her head she wore a beanie striped red yellow and black that Thad Shillingsworth had once donated to one of the charity baskets she'd been given. On her feet she had the only footwear she owned, an old pair of gumboots.

It took next to no time for her to see the twinkling lights of Rome below her, the black snake of the Tiber twisting through the centre. She slowed to a stop, and hovered above the city, searching. She soon sensed him. She could feel his warmth glowing from a small wine bar near the Basilica di San Pietro. She floated down to get a better look. In front of the building were aluminium chairs and tables, and it being summer in this part of the world, people sitting in the cool of the evening enjoying themselves. One of them was Ivan. He was with a young woman whose earrings flashed in the evening light. They both laughed, delighted at their joke, sipping their Pinot Grigio.

Anna was berserk with fury. How dare he! How dare she! Enraged, she took out her pebbles and started throwing them with all her force at the laughing couple.

"Take that!" she screamed, but even though her aim was true, the pebbles seemed to have no effect. Soon her pockets were empty, and weeping with frustration, Anna felt Bowraville and the she-oak forest tugging at her, the elastic ties pulling her back.

Ivan came home several days later, much earlier than expected. He didn't say anything about the wine bar, and neither did Anna.

"My mate, he got sick. Must have eaten something bad. They got him in hospital on a drip so I thought I'd come home."

He didn't say Ray's name. If Anna found out that Ray was out again and living back in Queensland there'd be no end of trouble.

Anna regretted that it wasn't Ivan who was sick. She hadn't figured that her actions might lead to Ivan returning early. The fact of the matter was she and her children were better off with Ivan away rather than Ivan at home. It's not that he hit them often, or let them go completely hungry. It was just that living among the ruins of a half-unpacked kit home feeling like a storm was about to burst was no way to bring up children. And he was cruel with words. He thought nothing of telling Anna she was useless, no good for anything and that she was fat and ugly. It was all true, Anna thought. She was useless. She was no good for anything. She was getting old. She couldn't even take revenge in her dreams.

Often Ivan sat on an upturned tin, legs wide apart, warming himself by the fire. "Na," he would bark, "Na!" and hold up his cup. Always, she got up and took the kettle off the fire, rinsing his cup of the old tea leaves, pouring a steaming cup to humbly present it to him. He would take it silently, not even looking at her.

Being Bowraville, Anna's situation was noticed. Joanie Phale, who knew more about most people than they knew about themselves, hated injustice unless it was an injustice she herself had inflicted. She had a quiet word with Ponty Beaumont, as in "Can't you arrest him or something?"

Constable Pontius Beaumont was sitting at his desk, turning a returned postcard

over and over in his hand. On one side, Joanie could see "Welcome to Bowraville" printed in gold lettering over a photo of a smiling pale young woman in a bikini stroking a bunch of bananas. The image had faded with age, so that the only colours left were blue and the gold of the lettering. On the other side Joanie could see "No such address" stamped over the words "Mrs J. Silber" and an address in Bidwell. Joanie reasoned he had been trying to contact Julia Silber for some reason, but had got the address wrong. Julia had suddenly left her husband Jude a few years previously, and apart from the occasional letter to Jude, she had not contacted any one. Ponty seemed pre-occupied, but answered her question while absently looking at the postcard.

"He hasn't been violent. No reports of him ever hitting anyone. What can I do?" Ponty hated feeling helpless. He looked at the four brass rings on his desk, thinking to himself that even a quiet talk with Ivan would be enough to make Anna's life a misery. Just a word from Anna would be enough to put him away again, but that wasn't going to happen.

But you see, that's when Ivan had his little accident. Not much of an accident, just got run off the North Arm road by one of Pete Newman's skull-faced steers that had somehow got on to the other side of a fence from the rest of the herd, and had crashed through the HT barb to the road. The car was sufficiently wrecked that Ivan was pinned behind the wheel. Joanie Phale, who had been nowhere near the North Arm Road, was the one to raise the alarm.

How Joanie knew such matters was always a scalp itcher, but she was never doubted. If asked, Joanie would say "It's just something I know." Later there was a theory that it had been Frypan who had told her to tell the police, too afraid of recent over familiarity with Constable Beaumont to go himself. The theory went that that spooked steer might have had something to do with Frypan riding an unregistered

Suzuki on Pete Newman's acres, but like most theories in Bowraville, was never proved.

Constable Beaumont radioed the ambulance and fire brigade, grabbed a medical kit and drove fast down High Street, turning left into North Arm. Both ambulance and fire brigade were based in Macksville. It would be twenty minutes before they got there. He soon found the car lying in a ditch, its front crumpled. The steer was alive and roaring, and trying to get up on a broken leg. Ivan was trapped behind the wheel, but looked unhurt.

"My leg's stuck. Bloody cow came out of nowhere. Should be a law against cockies who keep dodgy fences."

Ponty, knowing if Ivan knew it was one of Pete's steers there would be trouble, ignored the remark and looked him over carefully for any injuries. He was unharmed. There wasn't a scratch on him. The fire brigade would have him out in a matter of minutes. He walked over to the steer, took out his pistol, and shot it in cleanly in the head.

Ponty fingered the four brass rings on his right hand. He never usually had them on when in uniform, as officers weren't technically allowed jewellery while on duty. They were, he said, to remind him of family. One for his wife Nicole, and one for each of his baby triplets. He returned to Ivan's car, pushing each ring down so they were real tight on his fingers.

"Heard you've been overseas."

"What?" Ivan shook his head, looking puzzled.

"Italy or somewhere. Isn't that where you've been?

Ivan banged his head against the steering wheel. "Stupid fucking cow. I can't

believe this. I fucking told her I was going to Roma. You know Roma, as in Roma, Queensland."

Ponty raised an eyebrow. Ivan didn't want any cop trouble again. "Yeah, look. It's true. I was visiting an old friend of mine from inside, keeping him off the booze and on the straight and narrow for a few days. OK?"

Ponty nodded. "Now let's take a good look at you and make sure you're OK until we can get you out of there," he said.

Ponty was astonished at how upset Anna was when he said her husband had been injured in a car crash. There's some people, he thought, that no matter how much you do for them, you just can't help. And he'd gone out of his way on this one.

"He's OK, really Anna. There's nothing to worry about. Lots of cuts and bruises, and he is in a bit of shock, but that's about it. He'll be out of hospital in a day or two. I can drive you there if you like."

Anna shook her head and sniffed. "I'll go in later when I pick the kids up from school. Someone will give me a lift."

Ponty nodded. It was always hard to decide what the right course of action was in such situations.

Anna didn't visit Ivan after school, and didn't even tell her children. They were used to their father disappearing for days, if not weeks, at a time, so asked no questions.

Later that night, she took the last of her dried toadstool, picked up her pebbles, and waited. It didn't take long. She flew low, just above the tree tops, following the Wilson Road down the Nambucca towards Macksville. Below her she could see all of Bowraville in the moon light. The Nambucca, swollen with brown water looped in on

itself like divine cursive script as it made its way to the sea. Looking at the swirling eddies of water in the moonlight she momentarily had the illusion that the entire flooding river was made up of intertwined writhing bodies, a river of ghosts. She had heard the gossip about the baby found buried on the river bank and shivered, wondering if she could keep flying and never come back. All Bowraville was so far below her that it all seemed incredibly distant and meaningless. She sighed. She still had to do what she had to do.

It didn't take long for Anna to find Ivan's hospital room, on the second storey of the hospital. She floated outside the window, a hand on her pebbles, and peered in.

Ivan lay alone, the blue from the ceiling-mounted TV flashing on his face. He must have heard her, because he switched the TV off and looked out the window, straining to see beyond his own reflection. Constable Beaumont was right. There were a lot of cuts and bruises, especially around his face. One eye was swollen shut, as if he had been punched.

"Look at you Ivan," she snorted. You look like you've lost a fight."

Ivan's eyes grew wide.

"What? How?" he whispered.

"It's no more than you deserve. I'm your wife, and I'm going to make sure you remember that."

Anna took out some pebbles and started lobbing them at Ivan. She didn't want to injure him, just frighten him. Maybe hurt him just a little bit. She aimed for the legs and arms, as his face looked like it had had enough beating.

"Ow, shit, please. Can't you see I'm hurt? For God's sake you stupid cow."

"You should drive more carefully."

"You think I got this from some fucking car accident? Please. Shit. Ow." Ivan started wailing.

A nurse hearing the commotion, came into the room, and saw Ivan writhing on the bed.

"She's throwing stones at me. At me!" he wailed, pointing to Anna.

"Ivan, there's no-one here. You're in shock. I'll get the sister."

Anna waited for the nurse to leave before chucking another pebble. It missed its target, hitting Ivan on the temple instead.

"You'll kill me. What have I ever done to you? Why are you doing this? How are you doing this?"

"Think about it Ivan," Anna said, before allowing the elastic longing of the she-oak forest to draw her back to Bowraville.

Of course, Ivan and Anna never talked about what happened that night. What was there to say? Anna thought it would be pushing her luck too far to mention it, and the way Ivan talked, you'd think it never happened. Not even Tibby knew, and Tibby, hiding behind the trees, had watched her again that night. All Tibby knew was that her mother had hopped over a little clay statue hurling stones by the full moon. She was figuring that somehow Ivan had stolen all of Anna's common sense, which meant she'd better look out for her own.

Ponty Beaumont didn't expect his chat with Ivan would have any lasting effect, but did feel justice had been done. If you asked him he'd say, talking in the abstract of course, that it was all a matter of dealing with the recidivist personality. The sociopathic

mind had no choice. It came down to Ivan believing he couldn't help himself. So it wouldn't be right to say Ivan changed his ways because of his talk with Ponty, or because of Anna's pebbles. But sometimes, late at night, listening to the crack of fire embers and the sigh of she-oaks, Ivan sensed Anna about to get up to pour the tea and would offer to pour it himself.

Drop of a Hat

Once there were thick mossy trees all along the Nambucca. Cedar, ironbark, tallowwood, white cedar, figs, white beech, even that tree the mob called *Muurrbay*. When people started building fences, they started cutting down trees. So many trees were cut down that everyone could see what everyone else was doing, so anyone's business became everyone's business. Some of those old fig trees were so big they were ringbarked then the surrounding trees were felled on top of them, and left to dry. After a year the whole lot would be set alight to burn for months. By the time Thad Shillingsworth was given his hundred most of the old trees had been replaced by rubbish wood: thick lantana, wild olive, camphor laurel, poplar, privet and even willow. When he found his son Frypan carving his tag, being the PAN part, onto one of the few remaining old trees, Thad thrashed him so hard with a rain-sodden sapling uprooted on the spot that Frypan's arms and back came out in welts that lasted days.

Frypan wasn't usually interested in carving out his tag on wood. He normally preferred spray cans and the ripple tin walls of the Frank and Eliza Newman Folk Museum or the Hibiscusland Building Society, but that's how he ended up working for Jude Silber. He'd taken out the knife thinking he might cut himself with it, not too much, just to feel a little pain, and then started gouging the tree instead. Word was spreading that it was Frypan who had told Constable Ponty Beaumont about the baby buried in the river bank. He felt wretched, not just because of what he'd found, but because he hadn't mentioned anything about the conversation he and Jude Silber had last Saturday night. This was all town business, nothing to do with him. He felt he had been caught in a fishing net.

"I shouldna oughta done that." Thad would say later, full of shame, but never

saying what the thrashing was for. Thad was a Kinchela boy, which meant Frypan must have done some serious trespassing for Thad to have lost it. Kinchela boys had lost their parents, even though they weren't lost at all and wanted their boys back home.

There's one or two things you could say about people like Thad and people often said them. Old Therese Hendry still sucked her teeth when she talked about that bus full of university students that came into town from Sydney and put ideas into everyone's heads, leaving decent people like her to clean up all the mess. That was the start of all the problems, she'd say to anyone who'd listen: it was all down to some people always playing victim, she'd say. But not even Therese could ever say kids got treated rough.

Frypan lived alone with Thaddeus, his Dad, on the Macksville Road, which was disconcerting, because most people assumed they lived at the mish like they were supposed to. Despite being knocked about all through his childhood, Thad had managed to do well at school, and had even gone to university. Thad was smart, and didn't think either the mish or the middle of town were any good for raising kids. Most of the mish reckoned Thad was full of himself from going to uni on a scholarship. And when he came back, he'd somehow managed to get enough money to buy a hundred about one click from the road. Caused a lot of stubble rubbing, that, especially among the banana growers now that the prices had fallen through the floor.

Thad's land was all goat scrub and rock, flanked on two sides by one of those Scott spreads, the third by Jesus and Mary Fernandez's spread, full of thistles, and then huge State Forest lantana bushes on the fourth. The land would sometimes smell dead, on account of the wind blowing across the abattoir offal piles down by the river. No-one could work out why Thad had bought it. And no-one could work out how Thad had got the money. True, he'd a job as a lollipop for a Shire road crew, but that didn't

pay much and besides, he only got the job after he had bought the land. Others, smirking, said because he'd been to university the Shire, being a fair-minded equal-opportunity employer, felt obligated to give him the job.

Thad wasn't exactly Mr Bowraville Of The Year, even though there were plenty who felt sorry for him for being Kinchela. Most of the mish didn't trust his coconut ways, and didn't trust the way he was trying to keep old stuff going, acting like a bleeding heart. Most of downtown didn't like him because of exactly the same reason. A lot of people hung their heads and talked in low voices when talking about Thad. Even Thad's missus, Bogdana, who was from Ludbreg but was legal, got to not being able to stand it anymore. She rode off to Dubbo shouting "*Zbogom moj sin*!" to Frypan, but nothing to Thad. She was holding on to the leather-coated waist of a long-haired man called Rocky. Frypan was frightened of his mother. When he was little, she would tell him ghost stories, like the one about the village that was built on the bones of men slain in battle. The bones became ghosts and haunted the village, so that anyone living there was cursed. Frypan would sometimes wonder what battles had occurred in Bowraville's past.

Frypan's name was Frypan because he looked like he'd been hit in the face with one. At school Mrs Ringland called him Philip, which is what Thad had named him, but she was the only one. When Margaret Raymond finally got the cinema going again, this time without the fence, and showed *Deliverance*, because it was renting cheap, lots of people said Frypan looked like one of those banjo boys.

Thad had a second-hand, asbestos-sheet kit home put on the hundred. Again no-one knew where he got the money. Despite his looks, Frypan was bright, and Thad tried to look after him. He wanted Frypan to have a good education, and a loving home. He wanted Frypan to grow up proudly.

But Frypan didn't grow up like that. He grew twisting this way and that, just like the morning glory vine strangling the "Welcome to Bowraville" sign. He missed a lot of school. Frypan did occasional odd jobs for Jude Silber, like tending the garden at the Hibiscusland Building Society, or washing his car. The fact that Thad had a teenage son who was earning his own pocket money in a town like Bowraville would normally have been a source of pride, but there was something nasty about the relationship, something he couldn't put his finger on. He sometimes wondered if Jude was supplying his son with drugs. Often Frypan would go out at night to see friends, and not come home until real late. Thad was sure it was something to do with Jude Silber.

Thad never much thought of buying anything for himself. He saved like crazy, with the vague idea of him and Frypan just leaving and starting a new life somewhere. But not only did he belong to this place, he felt he had to protect it, and to keep its secret safe. The secret was written on the same tree that Frypan was hacking his PAN tag and foo face on. Thad told Frypan the secret by uprooting the sapling, just about bulging his eyes out of their sockets, and thrashing the daylights out of him while roaring like a bull whose scented a stringing heifer.

Anyone else, and Frypan would've fought back. But he was kneeling, and it was his Dad. And he deserved it. Frypan had never been hit in his life by anyone except Mrs Ringland, who was fond of laying her pale cold hand across Frypan's face, in the unshakeable belief that Frypan didn't belong at Bowraville Central at all. But here his dad was trying to break a sapling across his back. His Dad's veins were sticking out on his neck.

"Jeez. It's just a tag, Dad. Shit. You're hurtin' me." Frypan cowered, holding up his hands over his red, yellow and green striped beanie to try to protect himself from the blows. He started thinking his dad was enjoying this. Frypan was scared. Maybe his

dad already knew about the baby. It wasn't his fault.

Thad paused for breath. He stood there with his hands on his knees, getting air, tears in his eyes. Even though he was a few clicks out of Bowraville, there was a stench in the air.

"You idiot. You've ruined this tree. This is a special tree. And you, you idiot, you carved your stupid name all over it."

Frypan's lips trembled. His dad was making him feel like shit again. He'd never ever been this angry. And for what? It was just a tree. It was just a tag. And he wasn't the first. The tree had a trunk with carving all over it. What was one more tag?

"Just a bloody tree," Frypan whimpered. If he closed his eyes he could see the camphor laurel roots hiding the blanket in the river sand. Just a tree.

"This isn't just a tree," Thad said. "I was going to tell you about it. This tree is us. And you are carving your stupid tag on it. Into our tree."

Frypan rubbed his arms, and snorted some snot. He suspected this was something to do with traditional stuff. His dad was always on about this, most of which Frypan reckoned was just in his head. And whose traditions anyway? Frypan's own mum - the one who sent him the occasional Nintendo game or Wailers tape from Dubbo - was Macedonian. Thad reckoned he was Australian, but even his own mother Rose, Saucepan's gran, looked like she might be Irish.

"Yeah, right," said Frypan, rolling his eyes and moving to get up. He was hoping to meet up with some of the bros to do some bongs later on. His father grabbed him again roughly. Frypan was not used to the violence. He whimpered.

"No, you listen. I'll tell you this only once. This is a sacred tree. It's why I stay

here."

Even Frypan knew this was unlikely. He'd heard of the *Muurrbay* trees, but they were cut down a long time ago. And he knew there also had once been scar trees, but every time a timber getter or a farmer came across one of those they'd blow it up or burn it down. There was no way this tree could be special.

"When your grandpa - my dad- was alive, you could climb up here and see all the cedar trees going red, just after the winter rains. You could spot them miles away. That's why they all came here. Red gold. To cut them down and float them away. Down the river."

"Grandpa Jacko told you this?" Frypan asked the question in mock wonderment. His dad really was losing it. "Everyone knows this shit."

Thad had to breathe deep to control his anger. "Grandpa Jacko told me nothing. He didn't even know who I was in the end." Frypan looked at his Dad. Thad wanted to say more words, but didn't. He wanted so badly for Frypan to understand. He felt tears in his eyes. Both father and son had mixed feelings about Jacko. Thad, because Jacko had been stupid enough to stay on The Island at Nambucca Heads when he'd married Rose. Rose had freckles and red hair when she was young, and didn't look like she belonged to the mob even though she thought she did. Jacko didn't even realise the enormity of his mistake until one day he and Rose stood crying in the middle of the road, watching their seven year old boy being driven away in a big black Holden.

Frypan thought for a second. "Who gives a shit 'bout cedar trees?"

"I'm telling you what Fred Scott told me."

Frypan snorted. He knew exactly who Fred Scott was, even though the man

died long before he was born. The Scotts at one stage kind of owned everything. Fred was shire president for years. It was old Fred's cousin Simon Raymond himself who made some people stand, for hygiene reasons, in the stalls at the pictures when he was a kid. It was Fred's aunty who worked with the Church and the Department to push people around from one cruddy dump to the next. For all Frypan knew, one of Fred's relatives owned that big black car. The only good thing you could say about Frederick Scott was he died years ago.

"Why would you have talked to Fred Scott?" Frypan said "You a coconut?" He'd heard his dad called coconut lots of times. He figured at least his dad knew who he was.

"Fred Scott told me about Grandpa Jacko. It was Grandpa who found him."

"Grandpa found Fred Scott?" This was new. Frypan couldn't understand it. "Why didn't he just leave him? If I saw a Fred Scott lying under a log, I'd've kicked him, spat on him, and left him."

"But Grandpa Jacko didn't. He saved his life and then showed him something."

"How you know all this?"

"Because I was there too. I had to stay with Mr Scott while Grandpa got help. I was a small boy, maybe six. Mr Scott was lying there, all broken. He told me what Grandpa did. It was here. Right here. On this spot."

Frypan looked around him. There was just the one tree, and it didn't look like it had ever fallen down.

"Mr Scott was rescued from here? By Grandpa Jacko?"

"That's what I'm saying. Mr Scott came up here 'cause he could check out any

cedars all along the valley that hadn't been grubbed. There was still a few 'round in them days, but you had to know how to look for them. That's what he was doing here. There was an old ironbark up here as well as …" Thad pointed to the tree. Frypan looked at it again. The trunk had circles and patterns. In the middle was a pattern that looked like a snake. Underneath it was a gash, like someone had put an axe to the tree, but had given up after a few blows. His tag looked green and fresh compared to the old markings.

"So you reckon this is an old tree?"

"That's what I'm telling you. But you can't tell no-one. You have to keep this secret. Word gets out and you'll have some idiot chopping it down no time."

Frypan nodded. He knew how most people in Bowraville would go on anything to do with old stuff. Some years ago big Andy Murray was the talk of the town when he found some skeletons curled up underneath the kikuyu in his lower forty. The only reason anyone knew about it was because he'd blown them up with some dynamite and told everyone at the Royal.

"Not having some smart-arse 'versity-cated suits poncin' round my block telling me I can't graze there 'cause of some old bones. So I blowed 'em up," Andy Murray had boasted, waving his rum and coke around for emphasis. Everyone had nodded agreement. Andy Murray was a member of the Freedom Scouts of Australia, an organisation which believed universities were part of a United Nations conspiracy to rule the world.

"What did Mr Scott say?"

"He rambled, talking to himself more than to me. But I worked out he was gonna clear those two trees to get a better view. He started with this tree, but after a

couple of blows, his axe head goes loose. He was fixing it, about here I reckon." Thaddeus pointed to the ground, "When the old ironbark just fell on him. Pinned him down good. Here he was trying to chop down one tree, and the one next to it just falls down and clobbers him.

"It took us a little while to see Mr Scott. He'd been lying there for a long time. You couldn't tell there was any fella there first - just looked like a pile of old clothes someone tossed. We smelt him before we saw him. Tree had caught his leg. He's just lying there, sort of moaning. Grandpa gets a rock and a branch, and rolls the tree off him. But he just lies there. Shivering and sweating at the same time.

"Your Grandpa Jacko, my Dad, he kneels down by Mr Scott. Takes off his belt and wraps it around Mr Scott's leg real tight. Takes out that small flask of Bundy he always carried around."

"'You want a drink, Mr Scott?' he says.

"Mr Scott rolls his eyes and tries to lick his lips. Grandpa holds the Bundy for him and he swigs it. Gets the sun in his eyes, so Grandpa takes off his Akubra and holds it over Mr Scott's face to give him some shade. Mr Scott starts screaming and then slumps like he's asleep. Grandpa just looks at him for a few seconds. He then turns to me and says:

"'You stay here with Mr Scott. I'll go and get some help. Stay here with him, don't go away.'"

"After a while Mr Scott comes to and starts muttering something to himself, something about forgiveness. He just lies there talking to himself. I sit there next to him waiting, shying stones. I don't care what happens to him. But my grandpa Jacko told me to wait there, so I did."

"Maybe I nod off for a few minutes, because next thing I know Mr Scott grabs my arm real hard."

"'You're hurting me, let go!' I says."

"But he just stares at me and croaks 'What's in the bloody hat?'"

"It takes me a few seconds to work out what he's talking about. He's talking about Jacko's lid. You know the one. Just the old Akubra he always wore." Frypan remembered the hat. It was old dark brown rabbit felt. Jacko had bought it in Kempsey at a rodeo show.

"'It's just my dad's hat mister, that's all. What's it to you? What you see?' I'm thinking Mr Scott is crazy from lying under the tree too long."

"Then he lets go my arm, goes all weak and says 'Everything. I saw bloody everything. Whole of bloody everything. In there. In his hat.'"

"I shrug, thinking Fruit Tingle. 'What, all of Bowraville?' He shakes his head. 'Don't know what you're saying mister,' I says, but start wondering what Grandpa Jacko has in his hat."

"Did you ask him?"

"Yeah, I asked him. I waited until the men put Mr Scott on a stretcher and are carrying him down the hill."

"'What's in the hat?' I says."

"Your Grandpa looks at me, same way he looked at Mr Scott."

"Nothing, just nothing."

"But Mr Scott says he saw something."

"'Wasn't anything. I'll show you.' Grandpa Jacko takes the hat of his head and holds it up so I can see the inside. At first I think he's right, that Mr Scott is just seeing things. Then I see some of the felt is worn through, and there's a little hole in the top. Through the hole, the way Grandpa Jacko is holding that hat, I can see the tree. This one here. And those markings. I can see them."

"And?"

"And they move. The carving is a snake, moving. I shout, but Grandpa just shakes his head laughing and says 'You're just dreaming.' Mr Scott gets taken to hospital. He starts to get a bit better, then gets worse, then he, you know, goes away. All downtown say it's a sorry business, but all the mish say the Lord Almighty has judged him. But he tried to give it back in the end, you know."

"Tried to give what back?"

"He gave me this block. After Kinchela I was living at the heads when a legal bloke drove out and said this block was mine. Mr Scott must've taken a shine to me while I was waiting with him. The suit said it'd taken a while to sort out 'cause Mr Scott's own boys weren't having it. It took years more before it was mine legal."

Frypan shook his head. Just because you get something back doesn't mean the person who took it isn't a thief any longer. His dad just didn't get it.

Frypan never could keep a secret, everyone in Bowraville knew that. Soon after he had mates over for a ride. They dropped their Suzukis and when they climbed up the ridge for a bong, he told them. They all laughed at Thaddeus, but Frypan just smiled, feeling uneasy, starting to regret he started the conversation. After finding that baby by

the river, he was starting to think anything, even traditional stuff, was better than a town which had so many secrets it even had to bury little babies. Frypan was starting to think his dad wasn't so stupid after all.

Wasn't long after that someone snuck up there with dynamite. Frypan made out that he didn't care. But Thad wasn't the same. He couldn't help thinking who would want to do that? He still did talks and cultural stuff at the Central School for a while, but it was to kids who had lived all their life in town and had never even been to the mish, even though it was less than a click from the school. He felt invisible. At night, listening to an old record of Palestrina's *Miserere* he too couldn't stop thinking about all the secrets this town tried to bury or keep under its hat. He thought again of his father's Akubra. Whatever happened to it? *Sacraficium Deo spiritus contribulatus: cor contritum, et humiliatum* ... His own hair was going grey and he didn't even have a lid.

Into the Fire

Lots of people had theories on how to catch the squirming silver perch in the water holes where the Nambucca snaked around Bowraville, but not many people had ever seen any theory work.

Tom O'Donohue freely gave advice to any passing tourist or local, whether asked to or not. He'd swear that a small hook with a tiny pinch of mullet was the only way. The time of day was crucial as well. It had to be just before dawn, or just after sunset, on a day that was cool but not frosty. He neglected to mention he'd been fishing for years, no luck with either folk or fish. Bernie Lamont, who went fishing every Sunday and had caught one about thirty years previous, but had to throw it back because it was too small, reckoned silver perch were slippery bastards related to eels. His head cocked to one side, he'd show you a small, faded photo showing nothing, and opine you had to use a swivelled hook, and you needed a net. Andy Murray, the local historian and dairy farmer from the South Arm reckoned he caught them all the time, no big deal. "Just need the right 'quipment," he'd say, but never say what he had in mind. Also reckoned they weren't good eating unless mashed into fish cakes.

Thaddeus Shillingsworth, who was as close as most in town ever got to talking to someone traditional, or someone with an education, often got asked questions like "What you fellas do to catch perch in them olden days?" To which he would reply while tapping his nose with his forefinger, "We had our ways. Traditional secret." But if Thad had ever known of those ways, he'd long ago had most of them whipped out of him, and suspected the ones he did know weren't so traditional anyway. Once lifting up some lino at St Mary's with Tommy O'Donahue he'd come across some old yellow pages from the *Bowraville Argus*, including a small story concerning the court appearance

of two long-gone great uncles of Thad's from the 1930s. The paper said they'd been caught fishing for silver perch near Lane's Bridge which wasn't so much a crime even for them, although there would've been people who would have liked to have made it one. The crime - fined five pounds each - was they were fishing with dynamite. Which explained why Andy Murray, who was into blowing things up, thought they were an easy catch.

Thad could understand this, because with dynamite you could catch a lot of fish, and fish were good. Thaddeus became a Catholic when he lived at Kinchela, because he had to. "He was a fisher of men," old Father Tommy O'Donohue would say from the pulpit of St Mary's, pointing his bony finger to those up the back, towards the children whose education he was charged with. He would growl under his breath about the heathens, because that's what they were, their faces dark with sin. The girls were the worst, sometimes wearing those white Jesus dresses like old mish girls. The sight would make Tom confused about what decade he was in. Rumour had it that Tom O'Donohue had this theory people like Thaddeus only liked fish because they believed if they ate a lot of it then maybe everyone would realise how God fearing they were, and they wouldn't have to stand at the front at that Bowraville Theatre any more. Because Thad had been a Kinchela boy he would eat anything so long as it wasn't the hay he had been forced to eat as punishment. He'd have fish on Fridays, and many other days besides.

Thad had taken his son Philip - but everyone called him Frypan - river fishing a couple of times. On both occasions they had soon given up, preferring to eat the *cobra* worms hiding in the sunken logs. Tastier, and a lot less hassle than if they had caught a fish, which would have meant building a fire, and scaling and gutting the catch.

Not that Frypan ever gave up on the idea on catching some of the perch. You

could see them glide just below the surface. Mostly small fish, but occasionally one of the big ones would rise up from the depths of the water hole. You could make a proper meal out of one of those, if only you knew how.

Which is how Frypan made his discovery. It's not like he invented anything or the like, being Frypan, it's just that one Saturday in June sitting by the river with his Marley music and earplugs, he built himself a small fire out of some wattle twigs, in the hope of making just the right amount of smoke to keep mosquitoes away. The wood burnt too keenly, so to make a bit more smoke he grabbed some smartweed and making a small tight bundle, put that on the fire as well. He sat watching the river, nodding his head to the music, deep into the beat, not hearing or seeing the pale pink of Jo and Joanie Phale, bathing naked in the water hole on the other side of the rotting bridge pylons, yelling at him.

After a while he put the fire out by flicking the burning sticks and bundle of weed one by one into the water. He watched them fizzle as the water soaked up the small yellow flames, got up and started walking back home. Almost halfway back over the paddock to the road, Frypan realised he'd left a *Burnin* cover on the bank. So he walked all the way back, and as he was picking up the cassette cover, looked over the water and saw about twelve small fish on the surface, gulping air, which was doing them no good at all.

Frypan stood staring for a minute or two, trying to work out what was going on. The fish hadn't been dying when he'd left the first time. Had someone come along and poisoned them? He waded in and without any difficulty picked up the biggest. It rested limply in his hands. He smelt it: he couldn't smell any chemical. The air was thick with Burning Mountain smoke, maybe the smoke had poisoned the water. He tossed the fish back into the river. He scooped up some water in his palm and tasted it. River water has

its own particular taste, the taste of the country it has flowed through, and this didn't taste any different, just faintly of the ashes from his fire. Shrugging, he picked up his belongings and went home.

Frypan was smarter than he looked. After all, his father was the only person in Bowraville who had a university degree, so it only took him a few hours to work it out. He remembered once Thad was showing him old photos, including one of his Gran, called Aunty Rose by everyone, the one who was Grandpa Jacko's wife. The photo was a bit bigger than those small four-by-two jobs, so you could see some of the details of her face. An old woman when the photo was taken, but shy of the camera. She was giggling, and had her left hand over her face to hide a smile. Most of her little finger was missing.

"How come she got no finger?"

"In them olden days if you were a *jurruy* who wanted some good fishing you'd get most of your little finger chopped off. Woman's business. Tradition. Dunno why."

"Any good at fishing?"

Thad laughed. "Was she any good at fishing? Everyone said she was the best. She knew some lingo she'd call out to the fish. She'd call them softly so they would come to the surface just hoping she'd pick them up and when they floated up within reach, she'd just wade out there and pick up those grateful fish." Thad made it sound like his history, but being a Kinchela boy, most of it was history he scraped together long afterwards.

Remembering what Thad had said, Frypan got to thinking. Maybe it was the wattle, maybe the smartweed. Maybe he'd accidentally poisoned the fish. One way of finding out. Frypan even had a motive. Most people, his dad included, thought Frypan

was a bit boiled dry when it came to brains. He wanted more than anything to show his dad he was a clever man, just like him.

He got himself back down to Lane's Bridge early on the Monday morning when it was cool but not frosty, plucked up some smart weed, chucked it in the water, sat down, lit a bong, and waited. He should have been at school, but all Mrs Ringland ever taught him, Frypan figured, was to know his place. The river had been in and out of flood for days, and the water was swirling deep and brown. He waited a long time, staring at the water, sometimes thinking he could see ripples, though on the kind of *ganja* Frypan was toking, you could end up seeing anything. Frypan had bought it from the Silk People, who always reckoned they didn't use money. But like almost everyone else, Frypan believed it had been grown by those Thumb Creek boys, who, legend had it, would rather shoot than let you stumble across one of the crops. People had gone missing around Thumb Creek. He sat and toked for 20 minutes, waiting, then gave up.

Frypan was halfway up the bank thinking nothing ever worked, when he saw the small bundle of blanket mostly buried among the camphor roots. His heart raced. He knew what it was. Mr Silber had wanted him to get rid of it, but he'd refused. Apparently, Mr Silber had got his courage up and done the job himself. Mr Silber had tried to hand him a garbage bag, but now for the first time he could see the contents. He'd seen that type of blanket before: coarsely woven, grey with a deep blue border and the initials NSWG embroidered on it. He knelt down and was about to lift the blanket to see what was underneath when he heard a loud smack on the water. He paused. He knew exactly what he'd find under the blanket, and imagined having to answer the cross examinations over and over again. He could lift the blanket, like lifting a rock, and see what was underneath it, or he could forget he ever saw it. After a few seconds he got up, and walking backwards up the steep river bank swept the river sand with a branch

to hide his foot prints until he was far enough away to turn around and head back to the river.

In the middle of the water hole weren't any silver perch. They had probably figured someone was messing big time with their water hole and had gone away. No *bugambal*, but the biggest freshwater bass he'd ever seen. A granddaddy of a beast, more than two foot long, lying on its side, and sucking air the same way everyone said Angus MacNisse sucked schooners at the Bowra.

Frypan waded out and picked it up. As soon as it was out of the water, the silvery rainbows of its scales became dull grey. The fish looked at him, its mouth opening and shutting like someone trying to get you to understand what they are saying over the roar of a flooding river.

"Bless you, bless you," the fish seemed to say, over and over, carefully yet silently articulating each word.

"But I haven't fucking done anything wrong. I didn't bury anything," Frypan thought angrily, and with tears in his eyes took it to the bank, and gutted it on the spot.

You might think that Frypan's dad, Thad, being the closest most in town got to talking to someone traditional, lived along Rubbish Tip Road, but he and Frypan lived by themselves on the Macksville Road, a click or two past the races. Thaddeus owned a hundred along there and even had a job working as a lollipop for the Shire road crew. How he scored that caused a lot of scalp scratching. Someone reckoned it was because he had a university degree which some people, Andy Murray included, said just proved learning wasn't worth a rat's arse these days if they were learning the likes of Thad Shillingsworth.

So Frypan, with a bong hidden in his red, yellow and green Rastafarian beanie in

one hand, and a great big dead bass in the other, found himself walking home along the Macksville Road. He was angry with the fish, because it seemed to have been forgiving him for deciding to keep quiet about what he saw. It was all superstition anyway. His early schooling at St Mary's had messed with his head. It left him with a feeling of dread that took the shine off the idea that his dad might be happy to see that not only had he caught a whopper, but had figured out a traditional way of doing it. Frypan was lost in his thoughts imagining the scene that was about to play out between himself and his dad. Frypan had an uneasy time with his dad. Frypan thought Thad was maybe a coconut like most of the mish said. Hundred acres, job and all, maybe he was in with the Thumb Creek boys. It did Frypan's head in trying to work out his dad. On the other hand, Frypan knew Thad thought Frypan was growing up to be a waste of space.

So lost was he in his little dream about him and his dad sharing *yamaarr*, he jerked in fright when he heard Jimmy Wells' voice softly in his ear. Jimmy Wells was in the habit of unintentionally sneaking up on people along the roadside, so much so that come dusk or dawn most drivers kept a sharp look out for roos, stray cattle, and that damned Jimmy Wells.

"You shouldna oughta done that." Jimmy said in a sing song way, walking in beside him, his hessian bag slung casually over one shoulder. Jimmy had a silent footfall, possibly on account of wearing old pink sheepskin boots he'd rescued from Joanie Phale's garbage bin. Frypan exhaled slowly, relaxing himself, and muttering something about the weeping Christ. His mind raced. Jimmy was known for lurking around the river hoping to see a bit of Phale flesh. Had he seen what Frypan had seen?

"Shouldna oughta done what?"

Jimmy nodded towards the fish tucked under Frypan's arm. Frypan swapped

the fish and the beanie. The fish was getting to be a bit of a burden. It had already stiffened up quite a bit in the sun, and seemed like it was made of lead. It was a big fish, after all.

"That there is an old man fish. Probably 30 years to grow like that. And you come long and caught it. Shouldna oughta." As he walked Jimmy shifted the sack from shoulder to shoulder. There was something in it. He thought he could hear it make a soft noise like someone gargling.

Frypan opened his mouth to say something that if Mrs Ringland heard would have had him wash his mouth again, but instead said, "Me and my dad we're gonna eat this fish. This is good eating, this fish, so don't you go telling me what I can and can't eat. Free country init?"

Jimmy smiled and held up his palm in apology, and the two walked some distance in silence. A few bush flies also joined the procession.

"Jesus this fish I swear he's getting heavier," Frypan said. "I gotta stop a minute, give the arms a rest." Frypan placed the fish carefully on a tussock of grass and then sat down, rubbing his arms. Jimmy sat beside him.

Jimmy looked at the fish thoughtfully. It had quite a few flies on it now, and its river water smell was getting just a little bit stronger.

"Fish like that, you should eat it right away. You live next door to Jesus right? That's a long, long way to walk a big dead fish."

Frypan knew rightly Jimmy wasn't talking about Father Tom's Jesus, but American Jesus who was a neighbour to his dad and him, who would never eat fish if there was some muck called *frijoles* in the offing.

Frypan looked at the fish and thought. Few banana leaves, a small fire, he could have nice steamed fish in next to no time. And he was hungry. Tokin all the morning does that. But what about having a nice meal with his dad? He could still tell his dad all about how he sussed out how Aunty Rose had done it. Would make his dad proud, that.

'Yeah, OK. Let's cook the fish. You go get some leaves." Frypan said, standing up, and looking around for some sticks.

Jimmy grinned so his whole face crinkled, and pushed a lank hair strand out of his eyes. "That's my man. You're the boss."

They walked off the road to under a wild olive tree. Frypan built a small fire, scaled the fish and carefully wrapped it in several layers of leaves. He put the parcel to one side, waiting for the fire to go down to hot embers.

Frypan watched Jimmy as he squatted on the ground, staring at the fish on the embers. The old man was still agile, and had no trouble sitting on his haunches. Jimmy brushed a strand of hair from his face again, and using a stick poked the fire. Frypan reasoned maybe the hair was long that way to hide a patch of thinness in the middle of the scalp. As Frypan watched, he couldn't help but feel he'd seen a younger, more curly-haired version of Jimmy, something from an old painting. Not that he'd ever seen an old painting, only the small black and white prints of heavenly consorts, saints and philosophers in Miss Ringland's well-thumbed History of Art. Well-thumbed not because of any appreciation of the visual arts among the class, but because Jesse Owen, who had an eye for such details, found several pictures by some bro called Courbet that were real interesting.

Jimmy kept staring at the fire and as he was staring idly reached under his coat

and gave his back a good scratch. He half closed his eyes as he was scratching, like a dog does when scratched behind the ears. Although his hand was hidden under the threadbare coat, it seemed he was concentrating on scratching the space between the shoulder blades. He scratched delicately in the one spot, the sort of scratch that is needed to remove a pimple or small wart. Eventually his black-nailed hand came out again holding a small bible black feather that was decidedly worse for wear, its vanes tangled with grit and the shaft bent at an odd angle. Jimmy adjusted his haunches and stared intently at the feather in his hand for a few seconds before holding it over the embers and dropping it. Instead of falling, the feather soared upward from the heat, see-sawing ever higher. Both Frypan and Jimmy watched it disappear gently into the sky, becoming one with the blue.

"I'll be damned," Jimmy said.

Soon Frypan had the fish steaming in the embers. It takes just two or three minutes for a fish to cook that way, and using banana leaves as plates, the two of them made a good meal out of the bass. Frypan ate in silence, listening to Jimmy prattle on. Jimmy was good at faffing, especially when he had scored a free meal or a free drink. He called it philosophising.

"Have always liked fish. A noble meal. The kind of meal even Jesus would approve of." Jimmy talked while delicately sucking the flesh from the bones. Jimmy licked his fingers and wiped them carefully on his jeans. He burped and lay down on his back looking at the scuttling clouds.

"A blessed meal, a blessed meal." He let out a fart and started softly humming to himself. After only half a minute he started snoring.

Frypan thought after a while that this might be a good time to see what was in

Jimmy's hessian bag. A lot of people had theories, but no-one had ever gotten to the truth. The sack was in a heap in front of Jimmy, and definitely had something small in it. He stretched his arm over to grab it, all the while looking at Jimmy's face. The lump in the bag rippled. Slowly he opened the hessian, and was about to reach in, when the beaked face of a red, horned monster shot out and regarded him with staring yellow gimlet eyes. The creature then sped off, half running, half flying, cackling like a demon. Frypan moaned in panic, involuntarily scrambling to his feet. Jimmy opened his eyes, looked at Frypan, looked at his empty sack, and gave a heartfelt sigh.

"What was that?" Frypan managed to croak.

"Just a chook," Jimmy said.

"But it had red horns!"

"Some chooks do," said Jimmy, sitting up and wondering what it would take to keep Frypan quiet.

Frypan hiccupped, grabbed a stick and sat on his haunches, flicking dirt onto what was left of the fire to put it out. He felt cheated. Having just caught the biggest fish he'd ever seen from the upriver Nambucca, he had nothing to show for it but a feeling of dread. Frypan always thought his luck turned bad in the end. It was like everyone else had a guardian angel, when all he had was that old croak Jimmy Wells nosing around him with a sack that contained a deformed rooster. What was he going to say to the old man about the fish now? "I caught a big fish but Jimmy ate it." And what was he going to say about the other thing? He had been so close to making an impression, and now all he had was a story. Two stories, because he had also accidentally discovered Auntie Rose's secret method of fishing. Maybe he could still tell that to Thad, being traditional stuff and all.

Jimmy got to his feet, smacked his lips, looked at the sky and said. "Best be off." He looked at Frypan carefully. He couldn't leave it to chance. Jimmy had an uneasy relationship with authority. "Listen, Philip," he said, pointing a thin bony finger at Frypan's heart. No-one ever called him Philip except his mother who was in Dubbo and Mrs Ringland who should have been in hell. "Listen, I'll do a deal: I won't tell if you don't tell."

One's own Shadow

The voice was hardly audible in the dimly lit room. "If I understand you correctly Mr Silber, you want me to help solve this ... issue?"

Jude Silber sat opposite Therese Hendry in her River Street parlour. The deep red chair was so cushioned in dark velvet that he had to sit on the very edge in order to balance the tea cup and saucer on his knees. He wondered if she even had an electricity connection: some light would be useful. The quavering voice was querulous. He nodded, but not sure if she could actually see his head moving in the gloom, whispered "Yes." Therese's Shih Tzu, Lionel, made a small whimpering sound.

There was a moment's silence when all that could be heard was the ticking of an old chipped Regal-Jung mantle-piece. Jude could see dust motes in shafts of glaring Sunday afternoon sunlight at the edges of the drawn blinds. He hated the situation he was in.

"Why on earth would you think I could be of any assistance? Why come to me?"

Jude coughed and looked at the pressed metal ceiling. He couldn't quite tell if the pattern was really there, or if it was just his eyes trying to make sense of all the blackness surrounding him. Did he have to spell out the realities of the situation to her, syllable by syllable, as he'd done so many times to so many people in his Hibiscusland Building Society manager's office?

"I heard you have assisted in such matters in the past and thought…"

"Such matters?"

"Where…." Jude, searching for the right words, sniffed his fingers. "Where family values…. you know." His voice trailed off. Despite priding himself on being a practical man, some things could not be said. Jude wished he wasn't there. The big mistake was saying he would help Rayleen in the first place, but even in that he had no choice. Why she had to involve him, just because he'd given her a loan subject to a few conditions, he'd never know. It was all her fault. Rayleen had threatened to tell if he didn't dispose of her problem. What did she think she knew? Call me paranoid, Jude thought to himself, but I'm betting it's something to do with Eve's disappearance. Some people around town, Ponty Beaumont included, were determined to prove he'd somehow killed her, even though there was no body, no motive, no nothing. It was the story of his life: he was always being accused of things. His first wife Julia accused him of being hopeless before she left him. Eve, before she disappeared, told him he was curled in on himself. Even Kirsty, before she'd gone back to that Rhodesian hippy a week ago, said he needed help. It was as if the Lord God Almighty was toying with him, getting people to form opinions before they knew all the facts. Rayleen was like that: she just assumed. And now Frypan, the frightened little idiot, refused to do such a simple thing, and was in such a state that he could well say something that Ponty could end up hearing. And after all that help. Jude was firmly of the opinion that the last thing he needed for his own piece of mind was town gossip and Constable Ponty Beaumont asking him more questions in that mock concerned voice of his about his losses. And yet, he now found himself trying to clear up this little mess for Rayleen, as if he was somehow responsible.

"I see." There was more silence. Therese nearly asked Jude why he couldn't do it, but then guessed correctly the reason had something to do with his recent circumstances. Jude had lost two wives, the second one only last year. Only a few days

ago a young woman rumoured to be his girlfriend had gone missing as well. Jude was apparently a very unpleasant man to live with. Although he was known as one of the can-do men of Bowraville, Jude Silber had his limitations. She sighed and rubbed her eyes.

"Give the baby to me then," she finally said.

Jude coughed again, got up, and went outside to his car.

Therese stared at her tea-cup. It was deep brown on the inside, white on the outside, and had an oval picture rendered in sepia of a young naked woman sitting on the ground. The young woman seemed to be at ease, laughing so her white teeth were showing. What Therese had been asked to do was possibly illegal, but at her age she had no time for the niceties of what was legal or not. That Beaumont fellow at the police station would never find out, and even if he did, probably would not care to be involved. She would assist. These sort of things happened from time to time, and the best approach was to make things as if they had never happened. Disposing of a still born was a much easier proposition than what she normally had to do. And if she didn't help cover things up everyone would simply not know their place. She could only guess that, for whatever reason, the mother was just as ashamed as she had once been. In a small town like Bowraville, your business was everyone's business. She wondered if the ache she still keenly felt would be as strong, if all those years ago her baby had been still born.

Everyone thought they knew a lot about Therese Hendry. She had gained some fame after that trouble at the cinema, and for years after city suits with notepads and microphones would knock on her door, hoping to catch some of her words of wisdom on Bowraville's problems. "Are you a racist, Miss Hendry?" they would inevitably ask,

hoping she would say something quotable, to prove what everyone believed. Only once did her reply make it to print. A young journalist from a Sydney magazine, keen to uncover what it was that made Bowraville so blighted, asked the question in the gloom of Therese's parlour in a sing song cheerful voice she hoped would mask the underlying threat of the question. Therese, she wrote, stared at nothing her with her pale blue eyes, and softly said "Once there was a time…"

Therese had always been a helper. She had even been elected to the local council on a platform of making people tidy up their front yards, ridding the town of unwanted dogs, and building a public swimming pool, as the river was unhygienic, given its patronage. Though she did not succeed in achieving any of her aims, people knew she meant well and her heart was in the right place. When she received a civic award for her contributions to the Bowraville Tidy Town committee, the *Bowraville Argus* reported she was a "vital and energetic woman with firm convictions." When she was CWA branch president she had even organised the members to bake trays of lamingtons and take them to the poor people living along the Rubbish Tip Road. She wanted to show them that someone cared. She had even organised a welfare committee of concerned women, who collected old books and discarded shoes and clothes for the little children at Father O'Donohue's one-room school. They had even taken parcels of clothes to those unfortunate little boys whose parents couldn't look after them, but who thankfully were being cared for properly at Kinchela. The presents were all accepted politely and with good grace, but for years after she was mocked. For instance, if it was a Thursday and she passed a couple of women in the street, they would both try to cover their mouths to hide their smiles, not because to some people it was impolite to smile to one's superiors, but because - the mere thought was galling - they were laughing at her.

Therese had their best interests at heart. It ran in the family. So when those people on that bus came to Bowraville making accusations about all sorts of things including her uncle's picture theatre, she couldn't believe what she was hearing. Therese was the epitome of Bowravillian country woman generosity. She had never, not once, ever called any of those that lived on Rubbish Tip Road dirty, or layabouts. All men were equal, she often maintained, so long as they were properly dressed, formed their vowels properly, had a clean face and a decent job. It was only when some people would go into a cafe, for example, and throw all their food on the floor and then leave without paying the bill that you had a problem. And if truth be told, one that had never passed her lips, she remembered her grandfather once jokingly suggesting that his son - her father - "had a lick of the tar-brush about him." She immediately knew it to be nonsense one of her grandfather's less than tasteful jokes. Her stock was of hard-working pioneers who had struggled against the land, and won. Hendry was a respected name throughout the shire. There was even a street named in honour of her father at Valla. One of her grandfathers, a Wallace, had been the very first shire president. Those achievements weren't to be undermined by dark and lazy thoughts. Even in her own life she had made sacrifices.

But these were not the thoughts that filled Therese's head day after day as she sat in her gloomy parlour, waiting. Waiting now for Jude Silber to return with a bundle of some poor woman's sorrows. What had frozen her all her life was the anguish of the memory of lying in the Roma and District Hospital exhausted and hot, watching the fleshy pale white arms reaching out to take her heart away. The darkness was an infection turning the bright red stains on the sheets the colour of dull pain. The father, Ray, a handsome man who rumour had it was a wide boy, had been dating for months and was expecting to marry. When Ray found out she was pregnant he swore he'd stick

by her. She'd done him a favour by doing what she had to do, because if she hadn't, he would have had to come face to face with who he was. It had to be him, it was impossible that she or her family were to blame. When he came to the hospital with a bouquet of flowers and a brand new doll for the baby, the nurses wouldn't even let him see her. He stormed into Therese's ward demanding to know what was going on, and was left speechless when she said in the one sentence the baby – a girl – was being adopted out and that their engagement was off.

"But why?" he blurted, not understanding any of this.

"Because I've decided Ray." She made her voice sound as harsh as she could. "Now leave me and the baby alone. I want to get on with my life, and you should get on with yours." She knew then that she'd have to leave Roma. Ray would hound her for an explanation if she didn't disappear from his life. He didn't know any of what was going on, and Therese felt it best it stayed that way. Therese had been working towards her nursing certificate, and ironically had no idea of her own condition until even if she had known it, was too late to have done anything. She grimaced with the memory of the shame, not just of the baby but the realisation of who Ray was. He probably had no idea of that too. It wasn't the sort of thing families talked about. She could still hear quiet voices discussing her tragedy behind closed doors, and the joy and the horror of seeing her daughter for the first time. The pale green walls of the ward wouldn't let go of the words, and kept throwing them at her as she hid her head under a kapok pillow.

"How could she not have known?" The incredulous whispers of the nursing staff reminded her of the sighing casuarinas on the river behind the Royal at Bowraville.

The nursing staff and department worker had been sympathetic, but that only made it worse because she had worked alongside them. She knew exactly what they

were thinking because she too had shared similar thoughts.

She brushed a strand of sweaty hair from her face and stared at her baby, who was not crying, but sleeping quietly. The sister held out a blanket, waiting.

"She'll be well looked after, you know that." she heard someone say softly.

"If you like, you can give her a name. Have you thought of a name?"

Therese scrunched her eyes shut in anguish, and remembered being a little girl watching her father's broad neck and short black hair, as she sat on his shoulders while he fished for beach worms at Oyster Creek. The full moon was rising over the ocean, and when it was just above the horizon a dark red shadow swept across it. She watched in awe as the moon gradually swept away from the shadow, resuming its former radiance. Her father, laughing at her amazement, explained to her how a lunar eclipse works.

"It's the Earth casting its shadow on the moon. Shadows are the fastest thing in the universe. A shadow can move faster than the speed of light. Faster than any moonbeam anyhow. They reckon you might even time travel if you could go as fast as light. I reckon you could go any time you want if you went as fast as a shadow." She opened her eyes and nodded. She was back in Roma.

Therese broke the engagement, and without telling her parents anything, quit nursing and moved back to Bowraville where she and Doug Hendry had a childless and unhappy union for two decades. Her daughter would be a grown woman now. Maybe she was living in Dodge City on the Bungil Creek, but Therese shuddered to imagine her daughter living like they did on Rubbish Tip Road, it would be too awful. Sometimes she passed a woman in High Street or in Macksville and idly think, not through any resemblance (she could barely remember the face) but through sheer

fantasy "That could be her, that could be my baby!" There was no way of even glancing at a face for more than a second or two, and no way of asking the questions. It was ridiculous to even think you could recognise a grown woman who you had only seen as a newborn for a few minutes. She knew it was her imagination acting up.

Several years after moving back to Bowraville, while she was still in her twenties she was walking across the North Arm bridge with her best friend Norma Duggan when Norma had burst into tears. "I haven't ... for three months now. I think ..." Therese could hardly make out the words between the sobs.

"But Kevin is a good man, and you've always said you'd marry him one day." Therese wondered if she was on the right track.

Norma wailed. It took Therese a little while to realise Norma was saying it had nothing to do with Kevin, but with his brother Vincent.

In the normal course of events neither Norma nor Therese would have seen this as a problem, but Therese saw the dilemma straight away. Kevin and Vincent Day still lived with their parents on Bellwood Road at Nambucca Heads. Though they were brothers, they weren't technically. The Days had adopted Vincent because the government thought his parents weren't suitable care-givers. Vincent had spent nearly his entire childhood as one of the Day's own. He had a job as an apprentice at the abattoirs. Most people thought he might be Indian, and he was mostly treated like any other bloke. Vincent had no idea who he was. If you'd asked him he couldn't even say if his birth mother had been local or even what mob she belonged to. No-one, not even the department, knew. Once in Therese's company Vincent joked that he reckoned he was stolen. Therese had thought the joke poor taste, but realised the enormity of her friend's dilemma.

She had never done this sort of thing by herself, but knew the procedure. She had learnt off the sisters at Roma, who sometimes had to deal with similar situations. On a couple of occasions she had assisted. They would wait until late at night when the last of the doctors had retired, let the patient in through the kitchen door, and use one of the kitchen's steel benches they had scrubbed down with Lysol. All you really needed was Condy's crystals and a bit of hose. She remembered how, not even realising her own condition, she pitied the women who furtively came through that kitchen door.

"I can help." she said. That was the start of her civic duties in Bowraville.

Not that these things often occurred often in Bowraville: six or seven times perhaps in all the years since then. But they occurred often enough that Therese gained a discrete reputation for being able to fix problems no-one else could. As Therese saw it, the issue was not one of wilful miscegenation. That was the word the sister had used in Roma. One only had to read Ezra to know that word was a Christian sin. She herself had no idea of Ray's impurity until it was too late. The issue was due to the fact that in the pioneering days there were few women settlers in the district and godless men had their needs. The daughters would pay for the sins of the fathers.

Therese lived in the same house she had grown up in on River Street. The house, made from mahogany and cedar, had four rooms plus a tacked on bathroom and laundry on an asbestos sheet-infilled back veranda. The backyard virtually ran all the way to the river, but was filled with the detritus of generations of her hording ancestors, all of whom had been hoping one day their detritus would be useful. Flat sheets of corrugated iron, sheets of asbestos, rolled red coils of rusting fencing wire, old sump oil barrels, some leaking through their rusty walls, the remains of a Bedford, a Massey Ferguson on blocks, heavily rusted Dieldrin and Paraquat tins, some empty, some not, all these things provided trellises and support for the long strands of kikuyu, morning

glory, choko vine and lantana that grew all the way down to the river where the camphor laurels blocked out the light sufficiently that only the occasional rubber vine grew. Douglas had been a sleeper-getter who bought home a shilling for every track sleeper he cut, so the rusting tools of his trade, circular saw blades, old chainsaw pieces, chains and wire ropes also littered the yard. Once the Bowraville Lions Club had offered to clean it up for her, but Therese had flatly refused. She had chickens that made their home as best they could amongst the broken bits of machinery. Every evening when she fed them she looked at the yard trying to think of what it was that it reminded her of.

Therese carefully took the bundle wrapped in the grey blanket with blue trim, and placed it in a cane picnic basket alongside a gardening trowel. She didn't need to open it to know, the blanket with the embroidered initials GNSW told her everything. She waited until it was almost dark before setting off, threading her way through the wreckage of the backyard. She had initially decided that near some bramble roses growing through an almost rotted bullocky cart would do, but when she got there thought it too exposed and kept on going. Even though the day had been hot, the temperature was falling fast. Winter was setting in which meant it would be dark before long. Therese didn't mind. She knew her backyard and the river bank so well that she thought she could probably walk it blind. Even so, her bare legs got caught in the rose brambles and lawyer vines that littered her yard. Normally she would have cursed and gone back to the house for heavier clothing, but on this evening, the little vicious cuts the plants inflicted were almost welcome. She wondered if it was normal, to enjoy pain like that.

Eventually she came to the camphor laurel banks at the river itself. When she was a girl, barges could still come up to Wharf Street, but now the river was closed in,

with fallen trunks and flood debris blocking great swathes of the water. She took off her sandals, hitched her dress and with a nimbleness that was surprising for someone her age, walked over the river on a fallen log, holding her balance by stretching out one arm. Turning left, she then walked a few hundred metres towards Lane's Bridge. Seeing a natural depression between the buttressing roots of one of the camphor laurels, she began digging.

Lifting the blanketed bundle from the basket, she carefully placed it the hollow she had dug. Hesitating for a second or two, she finally carefully unwrapped one end of the bundle and stared at the contents, completely dumbfounded.

Therese was a practical person. She had never flinched from the messes of life, and always spoke her own mind. When they told her Douglas had been killed by a falling tree, she had insisted on seeing the body. She had stared at the pulpy mess where his head at been, not at all horrified, but nodding to herself that he was definitely dead. He'd been cutting on the downslope, something every man and his log knew you shouldn't do, and the tree had simply twisted and fallen on him. She did her best to forget him, there was nothing worth remembering. She had married him because she had to marry someone, and he was the only one who had proposed after she had come back. No-one knew what it was like to be her, to have gone through the things she had gone through. Even Norma had never thanked her. She had told those people on the bus that Bowraville had none of the problems they said it had, and they should mind their own business. She remembered the gathering outside the picture theatre, a large angry group, maybe a third or more of the entire town on one side and a dozen nervous looking students on the other. A flash from a reporter's camera would occasionally render the scene in stark black and white contrast. The students held placards mentioning something about the theatre. She knew what it was about without having to

read them. Just that morning those same students had put their allegations to her. She had patiently and politely explained entry and exit protocols and fencing were in place were because of public health concerns, not because of the ridiculous allegations being made.

A skinny young student who looked like he was on the Colombo Scheme said in a loud clear voice "Well folks, we are finished. Talk to any of us if you wish." Therese had walked to the front, and pointing to the man, wagging her finger at him said:

"We don't need your type here. This is a good town full of decent people. Who from Bowraville is standing on your side?" She looked around. "I don't see anyone from Rubbish Tip Road." It was almost true, but she doubted the few that were there standing in the shadows with the students would say anything. A teenage girl started to say something, but Therese ignored her. Then a young boy, about ten, holding the girl's hand said "Don't say anything or we'll get a hiding Ann." He was being melodramatic, but Therese momentarily wondered if his suggestion wouldn't be the best thing. These people needed to know their place. She continued. "You city know-it-alls with your newspaper cameras and poncy clothes and university degrees and jobs for everyone, you think you can come to a small country town, stir the pot, splash your muck everywhere and then go back and leave us here to clean up the mess? Is that what you think? Shame on you. You say we treat people unkindly. That's not true. Everyone has been allowed to go to Bowraville Central School for ages. Everyone is allowed in the cinema. Everyone is allowed in our public bars, our cafes, even our council chambers. Bowraville is a town that cares. For everyone. You are just a publicity seeking band of selfish adolescents hiding under the guise of do-gooding, hell-bent on making trouble and then getting the hell out before it descends on you." There were a few cheers. The girl let go the boy's hand and stepped forward into the light. What cheek! At first

Therese had difficulty understanding what she was saying, she spoke so softly, but she spoke directly to her with her head high, not looking at the ground at all. Everyone quietened to hear her words.

"You have no idea what it is like to be one of us in this town. Just a few years ago my aunty tried to enrol my cousin in your school. She was refused. If it wasn't for St Mary's, we would probably never get to read or write. We can only go in there," she pointed to the cinema door, "if we go around the side and stand at the front. In front of the fence. We can't even buy a milkshake at Harris' Cafe. You say you are on our side, but you aren't. You say we aren't treated differently but we are. You want this town to be our prison, and then you want to make us so afraid that we become our own prison guards."

Someone yelled out "Right on tidda," and another said "You can't judge a book by its colour!"

Therese opened her mouth to speak, but couldn't. The more she looked at the girl, the more the dreadful thought came over her that she was merely arguing with herself. With rising panic, Therese opened the door to the possibility that all she hated in this girl was just all she hated in herself. It took all her strength of will, all her determination to shut and bolt that heavy door again.

The situation could have turned ugly, but when Vince Noble, Angus MacNisse's old dad had suggested a lesson be taught she had stopped him. "We're civilised people here. Not like some. There's no need for violence."

And that was the point. She had actually tried to be nice to those people. She had explained to them the good work of her committee, and yet ever since then she had been mocked by them. She had done her best to help and they had betrayed her.

That was how she felt right now. It wasn't the fact that the perfect features were in shadow. She had been expecting that. Jude had explained little, and she preferred it that way. She didn't even know the name of the person she was helping. What took her breath away was the certainty that the face she was gazing on was exactly the same face she had seen all those years ago on a hot January night in Roma, when glancing at her baby for the first and last time, she had handed it to the waiting arms.

It made no sense. How could her child have stayed an infant for so long, only to be this still when reunited with its mother? She looked like she was sleeping, her tiny body curled up like a question mark. "I'm going mad," Therese thought to herself. "This cannot be." She shivered with waves of grief. Looking at the bundle she was about to bury, and realising, too late, that only love alone gives worth to anything, Therese whispered her daughter's name for the first time in twenty seven years.

"Rayleen, oh my Rayleen. Oh!"

Talk of the Devil

The night was warm from gathering storm clouds. The rain had yet to start again. Jesus was being urged to tell Ponty Beaumont when the Devil, red, horned and cackling to himself came charging out at them from underneath a lantana bush.

Jesus, Mary and two of the Silk People, being Dharma and Krystal, were bonging around the campfire near Jesus' caravans. Jesus was troubled by something he had seen a few days previous and was wondering how to tell. Even though he had just watched, he felt guilty, as if he should have done something there and then.

The other three were talking animatedly about other things that had been happening. Tamar had left Andreas without even saying good bye to anyone. Tamar had been a good friend to them all, so naturally everyone was concerned. Underlying the concern were things that had been going on in town lately. All four belonged to different mobs to those who lived in town, but were still disturbed by what had been happening. Unsettling and troubling things. Strange things that everyone, had they a choice, would just as soon forget. Rumour had it that Rayleen Newman had killed her newborn child and left town that very morning. Jude Silber, the respected businessman who had endured so many losses, had left his car running on the Jim Mattick bridge, and had disappeared. Everyone was worried about Cha Cha Hu who had sat with his dead wife all the way in from the top of North Arm and had been weeping in Bernie Lamont's parlour, not for his love, which no-one but Tommy O'Donohue knew about, but for his wife. Kirsty and Simon had gone missing, the only clue to their whereabouts being Simon's new bike wrecked on the Horseshoe Road. It was as if the whole fabric of Bowraville, worn, rain-soaked tissues caught on barb wire fencing, was falling apart, eroding like the river bank clods of soil falling into the flooding Nambucca.

"I got a bad feeling just the other day when Andreas told me Tamar just up and left. Tamar had traditional magic you know. She could tell." Dharma passed the pipe, made delicately from white clay.

"Poor Andreas," said Krystal. "How's he doing?"

"Pretty much OK. Can't understand why she had to go back to Sydney in such a hurry, of course. But OK."

"Who would do a thing like that? Did she really kill her own baby?" Everyone knew the subject had changed back to the question. Jesus knew it was time to speak.

"You know old Therese Hendry? I saw her last Monday down by the river. She was burying something."

"Burying what?" Mary asked.

Jesus hesitated. "It could have been the baby." Everyone turned to him. No-one said anything, waiting for him to tell more. Jesus hesitated. He didn't want to cast nasturtiums.

"I couldn't be sure, it was getting too dark, but she was definitely burying something. And crying. I could hear her crying."

"How is that old witch involved in this? Was she helping Rayleen Newman do you think?" asked Dharma.

"I don't know. But do you think I should tell Ponty?" Everyone knew the full import of what Jesus was asking. As a technical illegal, it wasn't exactly prudent for him to present himself to the police. Ponty Beaumont had accused him of supplying drugs to Frypan Shillingsworth and had warned him he was on his case. Ponty and Jesus weren't the best of friends.

"Shit Jesus. You need to tell. There's no telling what that woman is capable of." Jesus wasn't sure whether he meant Therese or Rayleen, but nodded anyway. He was wishing he'd kept quiet about it. He didn't want to know what Therese Hendry and Rayleen Newman got up to, and he didn't really want to tell.

Mary sensed his reluctance. "You have to Hazy. You can't have that crazy old woman just burying people's babies for them. It's evil.

"I'm not even sure I saw anything," Jesus said, which wasn't quite the truth, because although it was difficult to see what was going on with the sun down and the rain clouds rolling in, he'd certainly heard her sobbing.

"Joanie Phale said that Ponty had told her that Silber guy from the building society had something to do with it. Always struck me as a creep, and now he's just disappeared. It's spooky."

"I saw Ponty and some Macksville pigs by that bridge on the Wilson Road this afternoon. They had some divers with them," Mary said softly. "I reckon they think he did the deed and fell backwards into the river. You can understand why." Jude Silber had lost two wives in succession, and the rumour was he'd been going out with Simon's Kirsty when she disappeared.

Krystal, who had been pretty much silent, burst into tears.

"I didn't mean to kill him. It was just a curse!" she sobbed. Everyone looked at her wondering what she meant. Mary leaned forward and took her by the hand.

"Krystal, you didn't kill Jude Silber. All the pigs know is he's gone missing. No-one knows for sure if he's even dead."

Krystal sniffed. "But I did. I fed his name to the snails and cursed him."

Jesus tried to suppress a snigger. The Silk People were *loco*, the whole lot of them.

Mary looked concerned. "What are you talking about Krystal?"

"I met him at the markets. I didn't know he was the Hibiscusland Building Society manager, I just saw him as an anal suit. He was picking up my dream catchers and tossing them back down on the table as if they were trash. Then he holds up one that took me hours to make, like a hundred webs' worth, and asks me how much. Thinking he's new to town, I tell him that I'm one of the Silk People and all about silk and how we don't believe in money, and he says that I can't just give stuff away, that I have to have money for it and throws some silver down on the table. Not what it's worth mind, less than a dollar in silver. I say to him he has to give me something of worth that he owns, but he just laughs and calls me stupid, and says he just did. I couldn't believe the arrogance of the man, so I threw the silver back in his face, and you know what he did?"

Mary shook her head. Dharma nodded and put his arm around Krystal's shoulder. Almost to himself, he said "The bastard." Everyone fell quiet. Krystal sobbed the words out. "He said if my husband was the man sitting in the Bedford out the front and I said what of it, and then he leans real close to me smirking, invading my personal space and staring down at my tits and then at me with his yellow eyes, saying he'd just seen Dharma and Fern having a pash. Well of course I just lost it then and screamed at him that he was a moron, that Dharma and Fern were married too and how dare he pollute the markets with bad karma. I may have hit him."

"But you didn't kill him," Mary said firmly.

"But I did. You remember, Dharma? When you and Fern came to help clean

up." Dharma nodded, sadly, but said nothing. "As we were cleaning up I found his card that he'd dropped when he gave me those filthy coins. At first I didn't know what it was because it just had the word Frypan written on it and underlined. But when I turned it over I found I'd been arguing with none other than Mr High And Mighty Silber from the building society. So I cursed him, hoping to put some pimples on his dick or something like that, and fed his card to the snails. But I cursed him in anger, not in sorrow. And now he's not only dead, but dead because of violence to his own being."

"I don't think it was the curse, love," Dharma said. "It's just the violence in society bubbling to the surface. Even the vegetables…" Dharma stopped to inhale deeply and to add import to a well-worn theory of his: that all violence in society was due to the fact most people did not eat their vegetables raw, but preferred eating them only after they had been tortured. "They're all so violent. Have you seen the way they chop and boil their vegetables? It's so needlessly cruel. It's like people enjoy inflicting pain, even on themselves. I don't think it was your curse. I think he'd already been cursed by someone else."

Krystal and the Silk People thought she was a witch who could do spells that were real. Jesus smiled at Mary, rolling his eyes. He wondered momentarily if Dharma and Krystal even realised that not everyone was vegan. Mary glared momentarily at him, telling him to shut up. The trouble with Jesus, she thought, was that he couldn't accept there were things in the universe that were beyond explaining.

"Look Krystal. If he is dead it's because he chose to. He can't have been a happy man. You know all about his losing his wives. And everyone says he was going out with Kirsty when she died."

Krystal sobbed. "I'm just evil."

In the bushes behind her a cackle, the sort made in delight by someone elderly, snaked out of the darkness behind them. Krystal twitched in surprise. Everyone looked around. Jesus got up and walked towards the darkness.

"Hello? Anybody there?" There was silence. A twig snapped in the fire. "Must have been a koala. They are around here you know. Make the weirdest noises at night." He walked back to the fire, feeling a spasm of fear race down his spine. On his first night in the Australian bush Jesus had been terrified of similar sounds, lying awake with every muscle tense while Mary laughed at him. "It's just the bush Hazy. You have to get used to it." But there was something unworldly about this place, something not right, and even though he had been living on his property for years, Jesus still was not used to it.

"You're not evil, Krystal," he said quietly.

Krystal smoothed back a strand of her long hair and looked at him.

"How would you know? How does anyone know what is evil or not? I know you don't believe much in witchcraft Jesus, but just because you don't believe in it doesn't stop what I did from being evil."

Jesus smiled. "Look, evil is when you not only think about doing something bad, but you actually do it."

"But I did. I killed him."

"No, you think you did. But most of Bowraville says you didn't."

"But they don't know my powers, Jesus, so of course they would say I didn't do it.

Jesus rolled his eyes. Mary glared at him, and moved her hand in a sharp

downward gesture. Jesus ignored her.

"Look Krystal, you're not evil and you didn't kill Jude Silber. Evil is ... is when you do something bad and you try to hide it, or pretend you didn't do it. I don't know. Feeding a man's business card to pile of snails is just not evil. Keeping a bad secret - that can cause damage. That can be evil." Jesus' head was hurting. He kept thinking about Therese Hendry. What had she been doing?

"Hazy's right," Mary said. "You shouldn't cut yourself up. Just forget about it. Jude Silber had other problems on his mind besides his business card."

"They did this experiment once," said Jesus, who had enrolled briefly in a course at UCLA before realising that just because something was written in a book it was not necessarily true, "where they got some students to count the number of passes in a basketball game. During the game, they had a man in a gorilla suit come on to the court, wander around, and then go off again. Then they asked the students if anything unusual had happened in the game. Not one of them said anything about the man in the gorilla suit. It was as if what happened was so far removed from what they expected to happen that their only response was to forget about it as soon as they saw it."

"Your point being?" said Dharma

"The point being maybe that is what evil is. Trying to forget something because it doesn't fit into the way you think things should be."

"But you shouldn't blame yourself for everything that happens," Mary said. "That's just as bad." She turned to Krystal. "Sometimes bad things just happen. Not because someone forgets or remembers, but just because that's the way things are."

Krystal bit her lip and nodded. Perhaps they were right. But that would mean

she wasn't a witch, and didn't have magical powers. Part of her suspected this was true, but the very act of thinking it made her head ache. Perhaps forgetting about things was the best strategy, evil or not. After all, it was the way she coped with Dharma saying he was married to both her and Fern. She smiled at Mary.

"That's a really nice dress you have on. It's silk you know." Mary smiled back, and smoothed the dark grey and blue trimmed dress over her knees.

"Cheers."

Jesus, who hadn't even noticed what Mary was wearing looked closely at the dress. It seemed expensive, like something bought in the city. There was no way Mary could afford a dress like that. And yet it was somehow familiar. He tried to remember where he had seen that colour before. He closed his eyes, trying to remember, and saw Andreas and Tamar, arm in arm, at the markets. She was laughing, her long dark hair glistening in a shaft of sunlight that made her dress not grey but the deepest depth of infinity blue. You could tell by her clothes that she was newly arrived on the Nambucca.

"Did Tamar give it to you?"

Mary laughed. "I don't think even Tamar would have a dress like this Hazy. This is class. No, I found it yesterday floating near some mangroves near the Heads. There was a suitcase nearby, but the water had wrecked it. Must have come down in that last flood. I don't think Tamar would have tossed a suitcase of clothes into the river instead of taking them back to Sydney." She thought for a second or two, looking sideways to gauge people's reactions.

"And anyway, even if it was Tamar's, she clearly didn't want it anymore. So it's mine." She nodded her head in self-affirmation.

"I know what evil is. Evil is when you get someone to do something you won't do because you know more than they do," Jesus said.

Mary looked at him sadly and silently took his hand. She knew. When he was a boy, Jesus lived in a tiny two-bedroom apartment on Palmwood in Crenshaw. His parents' apartment was one of a crumbling block of six that took up the whole block of land, separated from its near identical neighbours by a narrow strip of concrete divided into two by chainlink. The only garden was at the front, consisting of some patchy buffalo grass, lots of bare earth, two palm trees that refused to die, and a spindly hibiscus bush that was almost leafless, yet often had a few small red flowers. His dad, Julio, worked as security in a nearby Walmart on Crenshaw Boulevard, taking as many shifts as was offered. He earned a little extra money from the landlord by doing odd jobs including mowing the tiny lawn every few months with an electric mower, and keeping the garden trim. If Julio was working an extra shift, or just needed some time to sleep, Jesus was delegated to do the job, but on this occasion had refused, knowing, but not saying, that the power cord was frayed. He had mown the last time, working quickly, too quickly to get the job done properly, and had accidentally run over the cord, fraying it so the bare wire showed. Not only that, but the blades had pulled the cord so much that the connection to the mower itself had become loose. Scared of his father's anger and the cost of repair, he had kept the secret. Julio eventually gave up arguing with him, not daring to hit a son who was now bigger than he was and already wearing colours, and went out to do the job himself. He was only saved by being thrown backwards several feet into the dusty grass by the surging rush of electrons in his hands, each particle wishing him somewhere else. Not knowing what Jesus knew, his anger turned to tears that night, but not because of his bandaged fingers.

"Jesus, forgive me." His eyes were shiny with the thought that if Jesus had died,

his own life would have all been for nothing. Jesus had never seen his father like that before. "It could have been you. You could have died *mi hijo*. Could have died." It was a persistent memory. Julio had died several years ago of a tired heart. Jesus, who didn't even have enough money to attend the funeral on the other side of the Pacific blamed himself.

Mary knew what he was talking about and this time took his hand. "You didn't kill him Hazy, you can't blame yourself."

"But that's just it Mary. I should blame myself. I knew but didn't say anything. It's like this town. Everyone knows, but no-one says anything. That's why I should see Ponty. He needs to know. It could be something, it could be nothing, but he needs to know."

Lucifer, priest feathered, red combed, horned and yellow eyed came hurtling out of the bushes, wings spread wide, aiming straight for the fire. Cackling in fright, the apparition launched into flight at the last second, flapping and squealing into the dark void. Krystal screamed, stood up, and started running. Mary ran after her, stopping her. Krystal sobbed in Mary's arms. Jesus and Dharma, stared at each other, realising the other had been just as frightened as himself.

"What the hell was that?" Dharma asked, to no-one in particular.

Jesus could feel his heart racing. "*Hostia puta*! What was that? A little devil? What the hell was that?"

Mary put her hand to her chest and opened her eyes wide. "Oh my god, that scared me. I think that was a rooster."

"But it had horns!" Jesus realised his voice was so high it was making his throat

hurt.

"It was a La Flèche. I've seen them at the show. Tommy O'Donohue breeds them. He has a run out the back of St Mary's."

"What was it doing here?" Dharma said.

"How the hell did it get all the way here?" Jesus asked.

"Oh God, it was chasing me. It was after me." Krystal started sobbing again.

Jesus shook his head, listening to the soft murmurings of Mary trying to calm Krystal down. Jesus was only now starting to realise that even in the minutia of existence were the things that made people tremble and grieve.

Walk on Water

On Friday morning when Jesus entered Bowraville, a small group of people on the other side of the river looked like they were wishing him away. For entries such as this he often did his walking on water trick, and he initially thought he must be losing his touch. The last time he'd done this there had been quite a crowd. This morning there was hardly anyone. Or was there? The water was glittering so brightly he had trouble making out who was on the other side. At first he thought he could see Jude Silber and Maria Taufa, both shielding their eyes against the glare. But that couldn't be right. Jude was missing, possibly floating among the fallen camphor laurel logs of the flooding Nambucca. Poor Maria, too far out of town and mind to ever seek a doctor's opinion was now lying in a box at Bernie Lamont's. And then he thought he saw Therese Hendry holding the bundle in the grey and blue blanket but when he looked again, she was only holding Lionel, her elderly Shih Tzu, as if it were an infant.

Apart from Therese, the only people he was more or less certain were there were Tommy O'Donohue, Gilberta Brinkerhoff, Miriam Donovan (who had one of her donkeys on reins) and Pete Newman.

Walking on water was something Jesus did well, and something he knew annoyed the daylights out of Tommy O'Donohue. The sun was shining brightly, but the rain had started coming down again. Rivulets of water ran down his sides. The Nambucca was in flood again. Lane's Bridge was closed. Steam rose from the asphalt. Curling tendrils of morning glory, whipping in the morning sun did their best to cover the "Welcome to Bowraville - A Tidy Town Placegetter" sign. The bright blue flowers and the decay of the years meant that the only part of the sign truly legible was "Place."

Jesus Fernandez lived halfway along the Macksville Road next to Thad and

Frypan Shillingsworth on land, everyone assumed, he had bought off the Scotts when they subdivided. He and his wife Mary lived in two falling apart Jaycos parked a little distance from each other, one for sleeping, one for storing things. Jesus had built a timber and tin roof spanning the distance between the two caravans, which served as a lounge room and kitchen with open side walls. About a hundred metres from the caravans, he had built a pit toilet and a hose shower.

The Fernandezes had been living like that for the last six years, ever since they had moved to the Nambucca. Jesus was building them a house, but it was taking a bit longer than he had expected.

Jesus wasn't legal even though Mary was from Sydney. She had met him as a student when travelling through Oaxaca, and they had spent three weeks together, hitching rides down to the Yucatan before she returned to her studies in San Francisco. About four weeks after she was back at San Fran State she received a message from a DA in Merida saying Jesus needed bail. There was no way his parents, living in Crenshaw, could raise it. Mary did it with her scholarship money, which meant she had to return to Sydney. Jesus followed. Her parents kicked them out. That's why they were now living in the Nambucca. Jesus and Mary had never married.

Even though he was Hispanic American, Jesus had a soft indeterminate accent. He was tall, and fit, with glossy long black hair, goatee beard, and habit of wearing old cotton white dresses. He was easy to recognise, even by those who had never seen him before. Everyone knew Jesus Fernandez, and not just by his looks. He was constantly flummoxing people by proposing courses of action which while sensible in the abstract, took no account of everyone's place, and so made no sense at all. It was Jesus Fernandez, for example, who turned up uninvited to one of Therese Hendry's Building Bridges Committee, and proposed, even though he was the only man there and should

have realised at that point he was not welcome, that the committee co-opt some Aunties. The proposal was absurd as it was bold, and was met with hoots of derision by Therese, who still maintained Jesus just had no sense of his place in the world.

Jesus didn't get into town that often, only when he had to. Today he had to. He had talked it over with Mary, Krystal and Dharma the night before and everyone had agreed in the end that it was the right thing to do, despite the potential consequences. Jesus didn't like Bowraville. He thought everyone talked about him behind his back. A lot had to do with his name. When he first arrived and attended a community market meeting someone had marker-penned his name on a sticky label and stuck it to his shirt. Joanie Phale, her eyes appreciatively focussed on his gluteals, came close up to him, leaning forward to enhance her cleavage and tentatively said "Jesus?" He had corrected her softly saying it like it was "Hey Zeus" but ever since he'd stopped seeing her she had concluded he thought he was God all damn mighty. She'd asked him where he was from, and he said "Elay." He had such a soft phlegmy burr to his voice and looked so traditional that she supposed he was from a place in the Northern Territory, perhaps Inkwelaye. Often when he spoke he used words that were lingo. When she found out from a laughing Pete Newman some weeks after she and Jesus stopped seeing each other that he came from Los Angeles she was so furious at her ignorance she spread the rumour he was illegal, not knowing it to be true. Not that it mattered then, but it did now. And there were the dresses. He thought of them more as kaftans, even though Mary had bought them in the women's section of the op-shop. Therese Hendry had once told Mary she shouldn't wear them, because that's what the young girls used to wear down at Rubbish Tip Road, and it would send the wrong message. So Jesus did. Days on the Nambucca can be hot and sticky, even in June. Several years previously, with all his clothes soiled from helping his neighbour Thad herded some sows into a

new pen, Jesus borrowed one of Mary's dresses. It was much cooler than the jeans he usually wore. Mary didn't mind. When he first put on one of her dresses she looked up from a joint she was rolling. Her eyes crinkled and as she laughed she said "Oh Hazy, you look just wonderful!"

At first he only wore the dresses around the camp when there was no company, but gradually he became so used to wearing them that he didn't seem to mind who saw him wearing a dress.

Today, even though the bridge was closed, he had decided to come in to tell Constable Ponty Beaumont in person what he knew. Living out of town, and often toked up, his sense of what was going on was a little delayed. He had only heard about what they found from Krystal and Dharma the night before.

The muddy river water shone gold in the fierce bursts of sunlight, but roared in sullen fury. The water eddied like squirming snakes, even though it was just over the bridge planks, just an inch or two above the timber rails. The sun, having broken through heavy black clouds, dazzled off the sheets of water. The river reminded Jesus of a giant pair of lungs, so swiftly did it rise and fall. A burst of rain, and it would test its banks immediately, and then subside to a babbling trickle in the space of hours.

Jesus hitched up his white dress, swept his long hair away from his face, and carefully trod forward on a rail, his arms outstretched for extra balance. There was the danger that part of the bridge may have been swept away. Each bare foot fall was done slowly, testing the submerged timbers for actuality and strength. As he walked, Jesus held up a palm in greeting to the people waiting on the other side. He wondered why they were standing there.

As he approached, it looked, from the Bowraville side of the bridge, as if he was

walking on liquid gold. Black frocked Father O'Donohue, whose job it was to single handedly save dirty faced children from sin while imparting upon them the rudiments of literacy, saw the rain running down Jesus's smiling face and whispy black beard as he walked forward. Father O'Donohue smiled back. If it came to his word against this dress-wearing hippy, who was anyone going to believe? It wasn't right, a grown man wearing dresses like that. And it wasn't right that he hadn't changed his name to something a little less confronting. Pious people, Father O'Donohue thought, had no right to call themselves after the Saviour.

"No bloody shame," Father O'Donohue muttered to himself.

Everyone was waiting on the other side not for Jesus but for the state emergency services boat bringing in the mail, bread and other necessary items to help the town, completely cut off by floodwaters. The phones were out. Pete was hoping the boat would be carrying Rayleen, who had gone out to shop in Macksville the day before and hadn't returned home. Miriam was hoping for a letter from Tamar, who had left town so suddenly last weekend. Therese Hendry was hoping that by keeping an eye on things she could let weeping dogs lie. The small group, which appeared to Jesus to expand and contract in the dazzling sunlight punctuated by the heavy dark clouds roiling off Darkie's Point were enthralled by Jesus, but knowing he was taking a risk with the bridge, knew he had come for a reason. Everyone dreaded what he might, or might not know.

The apparent welcoming committee worried Jesus. Had someone been gossing? A small town like Bowraville, everyone's business was public property. But the only people he had told were Mary Krystal and Dharma, and that was the night before. Mary was his wife, Krystal and Dharma were Silk People. It was inconceivable that any of them had gossiped.

Father O'Donohue, scratching his balls through his black cossack, carefully scrutinised the balancing Jesus. He didn't trust this bearded hippy who claimed to be of the faith, even though he wasn't even Irish or Australian, but from a town which Father O'Donohue equated with worldly avarice and not at all with neighbourhoods like Crenshaw where Jesus was raised. This Jesus fella, Father O'Donohue thought, was an imposter, a fraud, a prestidigitalist. If it came to it, he would wash his hands of this fella.

Therese Hendry, whose eyesight wasn't as good as it used to be, was only beginning to understand that the traditional girl walking across the river was a bearded man of dark complexion. She slowly recognised him as the same young man she had seen talking to a group of those people, Thad and Frypan Shillingsworth included, on altogether too familiar terms. The same indeed, who was standing on that very bridge looking at her when she walked up the river bank the other evening. What was increasingly obvious was this man didn't know his place, and as a consequence his was committing the elemental sin of not reminding other people of theirs. The slow realisation of who he was filled her with a cold anger. Things like this had happened before, and the town had pulled together. Would it do so now?

Gilberta, not understanding how the eddying currents could support a grown man, crinkled her brow, worried she was having another turn. Gilberta saw and heard things that no-one else did so often she had trouble working out if what she was seeing was hallucination or reality. Sometimes she didn't even care, but the sight of Jesus, apparently walking on water was, she thought, bringing her hallucinations to a whole new level.

Miriam, who had managed to get into town by riding one of her jacks over the North Arm bridge shielded her eyes against the approaching silhouette. She'd heard all about it of course, but was worried for Tamar and Andreas. Andreas had been acting

like Tamar had never existed. She'd written Tamar a friendly letter asking how things were, but had yet to receive a reply.

Pete, caught between a frock and a hard place, was also feeling there was a storm approaching. He had been having nightmares about Rayleen leaving, and she hadn't come home last night. This was understandable, as the river was fluctuating in and out of flood. With the phones not working, it was entirely possible that she had been caught in Macksville, and was unable to contact him. It was also conceivable, of course, that all his dreams had come true. They'd argued just before she left. For a while he'd suspected she'd been having an affair in the hope of having a baby. Just yesterday, he'd even rashly accused Father O'Donohue of unpriestly desires.

Jesus dreaded his slow entry into Bowraville. He tried to keep clear of town as much as possible. Jesus was illegal, and everyone knew it, but the fact also was that Mary wasn't, which might have been a mitigating circumstance. Jesus felt uneasy stepping across the sunken rails with such an audience watching. Walking across sunken bridges was a trick he'd done many times before, as the Nambucca was often in flood. But the way people were glaring at him made him uncomfortable.

Jesus also began to regret the choice of clothing. He didn't mind being seen publicly in a dress, it was just that this dress, now wet and clinging from rain showers, was starting to get in the way. Instead of holding his hand up in greeting, he now concentrated on holding both arms out for balance. Father O'Donohue was waving his hand and pointing at something, a stick perhaps, floating sinuously in the water. Though only metres away, Jesus couldn't hear what he was shouting above the roar of the flood waters. Jesus looked where he was pointing, and saw the stick, a sine wave of motion, moving gracefully towards his foot. A brown snake. Jesus lifted his foot out of the way as the snake, unable to battle the current, slid on past. But the foot work cost

him his balance, and he fell on to the deck side of the bridge. Everyone murmured. Father O'Donohue momentarily grinned before he composed his face. Jesus, floundering in the water tried to stand, but the current was too strong. The rail on the other side briefly caught him, and he wrapped his hands around the wooden beam, using it to steady himself. Soaked through, he waded knee deep to the bank. The dress clung to him like wet tissue paper. His foot was bleeding heavily, having snagged himself on a nail or piece of wire. He sat down, panting, holding his foot to examine the small gash.

"Are you OK?" Gilberta asked, genuinely concerned.

Jesus panted, getting his breath back without saying anything.

"Must be important to come into town when the bridge is out," Father O'Donohue said, watching him carefully. Jesus returned the stare, but said nothing.

"Why would you do such a dangerous thing, young man?" Therese Hendry demanded.

Jesus looked at her evenly. "Police. I have to report something to the police."

Therese Hendry said nothing, but sucked her teeth in agitation. A few years younger, and she would have been more careful. A few years younger, she wouldn't have got herself into a situation where she agreed to do favours for such an unpleasant man as Jude Silber.

Miriam came over to Jesus, looking concerned.

"Your foot is bleeding. Here, you can ride Hamor up to the station."

Downstream the river roared as an SES inflatable made its way heavily against the current, eventually landing on the asphalt beach formed by the road dipping

towards the bridge. Two men in orange vests got out, and with Father O'Donohue and Pete's help took several heavy large plastic containers up to dry land. Miriam was handed a postcard from Sydney: Tamar had written. Pete was asking questions about Rayleen, but neither of the boat crew had seen her. They didn't stay long - they were the only means of transport for a large swathe of river for at least the next few hours.

Jesus rode the donkey with Miriam leading it, all the way up the High Street hill to the edge of town. She held the donkey while he climbed down, and led the beast slowly away. Along the median strip of High Street stood a row of palm trees, much like the bedraggled palm trees lining Palmwood Drive where Jesus had grown up. These, unlike the pollution choked palms where he had grown up, were the worse for wear because of the constant rain. They looked like they were drowning in the sodden soil, their water heavy fronds leaning down as if to shield Jesus as Miriam led the donkey up the hill. When they reached the top, Jesus said he'd walk the rest of the way so Miriam could help with the supplies being carried by Pete and Tommy.

Jesus walked past the Central School just as the school bell was ringing and saw Anna Platonov doing something she shouldn't underneath the school pines. Bowraville, Jesus thought, was full of people doing things they shouldn't. Leaning over the fence, Jesus wagged his finger at her, but she ignored him. He shrugged, and turning his back went a bit further on, and, limping on his bloodied foot climbed the stairs to the station entrance.

Jesus tried the door, but it was locked, so he walked around the side to Constable Pontius Beaumont's residence.

It was a Friday morning, and technically the police station should have been manned. But Constable Beaumont often clocked up overtime working out of hours,

and had been doing a fair bit of that lately. Jesus found Constable Beaumont dressed only in stubbies and thongs pruning his *Fée des Neiges* roses in the side driveway with a huge pair of rusty shears. White roses grew well on the Nambucca, as long as you could control the mildew, and use the river sludge near the abattoirs for fertiliser. Even though these were regularly pruned roses, long thorny tendrils were scattered across the driveway, having fallen victim to Constable Beaumont's shears. Constable Beaumont looked Jesus up and down, and returned to his pruning.

"This better be good, Jesus. Even I'm entitled to a day off. It's been a hell of a week." Constable Beaumont pronounced the name the English way, even though he knew how to say it.

"The bundle, the little bundle…you know…the baby. I saw who put the baby there, buried it. It's just I didn't know what I was seeing at the time."

Constable Beaumont looked at him carefully and said softly "Now why would you want to get involved in shit like that?"

"I'm not involved. It's just that I saw something." Jesus hesitated, looking at Constable Beaumont shake his head. "Someone. Down by the river the other evening. I didn't know until last night what I had actually seen, but now I know I need to tell you. Surely you want the truth?" Jesus didn't mention Therese's name. He figured a description would do. He wanted to tell the truth, but was now hesitant about telling all of it.

Constable Beaumont looked straight at Jesus, and took a step forward. He was much shorter than Jesus, but looked like he was ready to fight.

"Listen you ..." Constable Beaumont was about to say "hippy" but stopped himself in time. "What's truth anyhow? You have a choice. You just go back home and

forget this conversation or I take a formal statement and use what you say to start interviewing people. Maybe even arresting someone. Would you like that Jesus? Would you like me to arrest somebody? Is that it? You want me to upset the entire town? You think I don't have better things to do. I had to spend all yesterday helping drag the river bed from off the Mattick Bridge, looking for a man who clearly has explaining to do. And here you are, complaining about a …a misdemeanour."

Jesus knew that Jude Silber had gone missing. His car and rifle had been found on the Mattick Bridge. Jesus imagined the man, overcome at last by grief, floating in the eddies of the raging river.

"Poor Jude," he said. "Did you find the body?"

"No, just a Sako rifle and some women's clothing." Constable Beaumont leaned towards him and hissed. "As for Jude, you wouldn't happen to know where we could find him do you?"

Jesus opened and shut his mouth. He hadn't expected a pat on the back, but he had expected that there be more interest in what he knew. How could an entire town, its police officer included, pretend that something hadn't happened, when he had seen it with his own eyes?

"I think I would prefer to make the statement."

It took a few hours for everyone to find out: it wasn't as if Constable Beaumont was going to post a notice on the station noticeboard. Jesus had of course been given a phone call, but the phones were out, and the only person he could have called anyway was his neighbour Thaddeus Shillingsworth as he and Mary were on a five year waiting list for a phone connection. It was only when Miriam, curious to see if Jesus needed a ride back to the bridge, called into the police station that the truth became known.

The Bowraville police station lockup was not the most secure prison in the world, nor in the normal course of events did it need to be. A small white stone outbuilding behind the garage, it had a slit window, a basin, a bench with a thin mattress and blanket, and a heavy steel door whose bolt lock had been removed decades before. The lockup's primary purpose was to lock up patrons from the bowling club up the road who were too drunk to know they could just open the cell door and walk, or people from the edge of town, usually arrested on a Sunday night for being upset at having had one of their dogs shot. Either way, the lockup's occupants were too sensible or too incapable to open the cell door and walk.

Jesus was neither, and having experienced prisons before was fighting an increasing sense of fear. All he had done was ask Constable Beaumont if he could make a statement and here he was locked up for being an illegal immigrant. He and Mary had known Constable Beaumont for years. Although the subject was never discussed, everyone assumed Constable Beaumont knew who all the illegal immigrants were, and that he chose to turn a blind eye. Jesus imagined being deported, and returning to the endless ribbons of urban sprawl and hopelessness that was Crenshaw. There was no way he was going back to that life.

Jesus paced the cell fretting on what to do. The daylight was fading, Mary would be getting worried. Someone would be able to tell her as soon as the river went down enough for cars to cross the bridge. That could be in a few hours, or in a few days. The Nambucca was like that. He slammed the cell door with the flat of his hand in exasperation, and was surprised to find it swing open by a few inches.

Jesus peered out into the gloom. He could see the blue flicker of Constable Beaumont's TV against the garage wall, and could smell lamb chops being grilled. He guessed he would be served dinner soon, and incorrectly guessed that Constable

Beaumont would be amazed to find the door unlocked and would immediately rectify the situation. He had to get away. Treading softly, heel first so as to not make the slightest sound, Jesus walked quickly up the driveway. He gasped as he trod on one of the rose clippings, and picking it up, managed to get a tendril snared in his long hair. His feet were in a bad way: not only had he gashed a foot on the bridge, but both feet were now studded with thorns. Ignoring the pain, he hobbled down the hill and in to River Street, thinking he could cut across the paddocks, somehow cross the river, and make his way home. It wasn't until he was hidden by the river bank camphor laurels that he sat down. Whimpering, he carefully pulled the thorns from his feet.

As soon as Mary found out what had happened (Thaddeus had heard off Joanie Phale, who had heard off Miriam) she grabbed a raincoat and torch and walked into town, as the car had been out of action for weeks. The river had dropped a lot since the morning, so she was able to pick her way on foot across the bridge which was now covered in grey sludge. She didn't even bother to check the police station but marched straight on around the side to the residence. She could hear Constable Beaumont's triplets wailing and looking up, could see Nicole looking down at her from the kitchen sink window.

"Ponty! Ponty you berk!" Nicole yelled. Mary could tell instantly whose side she was on. "Mary Fernandez is here!"

Constable Beaumont met her at the back door, and smiled weakly.

"I believe you have arrested my husband. Where is he?" she was almost shouting.

"Now look Mary, I have reason to believe he has outstayed his visa and is an illegal immigrant."

"You know that's not the reason you've locked him up. You've done it because of what he told you. You want to keep it a secret."

Constable Beaumont smiled wanly. "Look. Frypan found the baby. It was just a still born baby. It has been dealt with. Why go to all this unnecessary bother? A small town like ours, we should all be sticking together, not pointing fingers at each other over nothing."

Mary flared her nostrils. "You un-arrest him now or you'll regret this for the rest of your life."

Constable Beaumont looked down and shook his head, but put on his thongs which were by the back door. Nicole was giving him grief, not knowing that all he was doing was making Jesus see some sense. If the stupid man wanted to cause trouble, then let it happen, he'd had enough. Sometimes he wished he could wash his hands of the whole of Bowraville.

"Come on then Mary," he said. "Let's see the prisoner. Maybe you can talk some sense into him."

They walked to the back of the garage. Constable Beaumont turned his palm upwards towards the door, indicating for Mary to open it. The cell inside was brightly lit, small and empty. Constable Beaumont shook his head again. Some people just didn't know how to play by the rules.

"When you see him Mary, tell him from me to think carefully about things. If he wants a place like Bowraville to stick to him, then he should stick to it." But Mary didn't hear him. She was already walking around the perimeter of the garden, cooee-ing for Jesus.

When she got back home, he was sitting on an empty Dieldrin tin by the fire. As soon as he saw her he stood up, showing his bloodied palms and feet.

"We have to get away from this place, Mary." Jesus said, almost sobbing. "The pigs are on to us. We don't belong here. This is not our place. We've got to go."

Mary looked at him and sighed. She had the feeling that once in Bowraville, you could never leave. "Oh Hazy, you know we can't."

Where the Heart is

The previous September when the winter rains had finished and the spring storms were cracking the sky so much that water leaked everywhere, Rayleen had gone to the Hibiscusland Building Society to sort out finances. Without consulting her, Pete had taken out a business loan as revenue was way down. The Royal, never a great money earner, was a tied pub in that it was leased from the brewery and could only sell the one brand of beer. It had fallen on hard times lately because of a prolonged brewer's strike in Grafton. Bundies and cokes were all right for some, but weren't enough to pay the bills. Pete just signed the documents and pretended everything was hunky dory until Rayleen, out of curiosity, opened an envelope addressed to Pete with the name of a law firm in Coffs Harbour in the corner of the envelope, only to find it was a final letter of demand. She was furious at Pete for being so stupid, but more furious at herself for not keeping him on a tight leash. The thought that she'd have to dip into her secret tin made her feel sick. And Pete belligerently defending his actions didn't help. Rayleen thought Jude Silber, the manager of the local Building Society branch was a reasonable man, and that perhaps they could come to a better arrangement. The thought of being chained to Pete Newman and a falling apart pub through sheer poverty clawed at her stomach. There was something about herself that attracted losers, she thought bitterly. Pete preferred pig shooting with Ponty Beaumont to spending his free time with her, and Cha Cha, though a comforting confidante, was hardly a man of action. She hadn't chosen this life, but had somehow managed to fall into its drowning waters.

Rayleen was sure Jude would be sympathetic because like everyone else in Bowraville, she believed Jude Silber got his branch-manager-of-the-month awards for lending lots of money, thus economically stimulating the community. In fact, Jude got

his awards for months when all five branches of the building society lost money: the Bowraville branch in those instances lost the least because Jude hardly ever gave out loans.

Jude heard her out patiently, writing what Rayleen thought were notes but was just the word "Sako" over and over again, on a small pad, before softly saying no, the money needed to be paid or legal proceeding would be taken. Rayleen was flabbergasted. She thought herself an upstanding member of the community. She and Pete were among the few people in town who actually had a job that provided income. She imagined herself stuck in this town. Tears came to her eyes. He was showing her the door when she blurted out "But why?"

Jude hardly ever gave out loans, despite the rumours. Truth of the matter was that most of his customers, though welcomed when putting money in, were deemed a bad credit risk when taking money out. Banana prices were through the floor, the dairy industry had collapsed, and the only people with a steady income either worked for the Shire or for the abattoirs. At least half the businesses down High Street were on some form of unemployment office benefit. Even Jude was collecting a small fortnightly cheque on behalf of the Hibiscusland Building Society to help subsidise the casual wages of Frypan Shillingsworth who worked as a gardener and odd jobs man a few hours a week. Ponty Beaumont had explained to Jude he didn't have to pay anything to Frypan, at least for a year, but Jude, believing himself to be a fair and reasonable man, thought there was no harm in the unemployment office giving Frypan a small wage for his duties.

"Look," Jude said, rolling his eyes, and explaining that as a bad credit risk he had no choice but to call in the loan. As he spoke Rayleen found herself staring at his small brown teeth. Jude had been a dentist once, but he had the worst teeth of anyone

Rayleen had ever seen.

"The bottom line is, I just can't help you. The society can't keep writing off bad debt. We have to survive as a business too you know."

"But there must be something you can do. Something Pete and I can do?"

Jude looked her up and down. He coughed. "There is perhaps something."

Rayleen, though getting to be in her late-twenties, had kept her girlish looks. She was small and muscular, with straight straw blond hair cut by herself to shoulder length. She had olive skin and blue eyes. Her mother supposed she had inherited the good-look genes from some long forgotten Italian relative who had saved her from the pasty complexion of her north German parents. She had the sort of chin and nose, that was attractive now but which would become sharp in later life. Her eyes for the moment were unlined with the crinkles that denoted a hard life. She wasn't exactly pretty like the girls in Pete's calendar, but she was poised and had an air of confidence, like someone who knew exactly who she was. Age hadn't claimed her yet, and ever since they had met on the bridge Jude, had he asked himself, would have admitted she was desirable.

"We could come to an arrangement where legal action is stalled, and there is a moratorium of repayments. It will end up costing you and Pete a little more, but it could be done." Jude flashed his smile for a second or two.

Rayleen looked hopeful.

Jude paused and looked at the piece of paper he had been writing on, as if he was consulting his notes. Sako was an acronym for Serious About Knowing Order, but it was also a word etched in acid on the object in the boot of his car. It wasn't like he was asking for much. He leaned forward. Jude was a large man with pasty white skin.

His breath smelled like rotting meat overlaid with cough drops. He wore a beige cardigan, a present from his second wife who had gone missing only a few weeks previously. Everyone had marvelled at how Jude had overcome his grief and had gone back to work so quickly.

"You will have to sign some papers, of course, and you would have to meet with some …some added conditions. Nothing onerous"

Rayleen looked at him quizzically.

Jude coughed. "You see, I live alone these days…" He dabbed an eye with a blue checked handkerchief. "I don't know if you know…"

"Oh yes, I am so sorry," Rayleen said. All of Bowraville knew.

"It's the not knowing that rips me …" Jude stopped, and dabbed his eyes again. He looked up at the ceiling, and coughed. "You see, I live upstairs, just a small flat. Perhaps I could get you ... the flat ... I'm a busy man. You'd be paid, of course."

"But of course," Rayleen said. "That would be wonderful. I could clean it tomorrow if you like."

"I'd prefer an evening," Jude said, looking up at the portrait of the Queen on the wall behind Rayleen. "I wouldn't want noises to be heard during business hours." He coughed again, and smiled momentarily again.

After the first evening Rayleen, shocked at her naïve stupidity, felt so miserably dirty she had to shower for so long that Pete banged on the screen to say she was wasting hot water. She hated Jude Silber, he represented everything that was bad about this place. Jude had come up silently behind her in the flat, putting one pale clammy hand over her mouth while groping down her track pants with the other. He'd

whispered in her ear "You give favours to get favours, girlie. That's the way it is." He was too big to struggle against. Things got weird. She was astonished that the man was suggesting that he liked her, even after yelling at her to stop being so tense. He said it with such anger that she flinched from the words. She had allowed it to happen. She needed Jude's help. It was just the once. He immediately lost interest in her, making her sign her car as security instead of continuing with the cleaning arrangement. It was no wonder that Julia and Eve had just got up and left. As far as Pete was concerned, they had been given a reprieve through Rayleen's good financial management. Pete could never know.

Now, sitting on the laundry floor amazed at how quickly things had happened, she could hardly credit that things had turned out quite this way. She had known what was happening, of course, but when she failed to mention it to anyone else, it seemed as if no-one else had noticed. Pete had suspected, but had taken her at her word. She had imagined as time went on that she would ignore the inevitable whispers and Pete's bellowing rage. She sometimes was on the verge of telling Pete or Cha Cha, but how could she, when neither of them had anything to do with this? Everyone knew everyone else's business, but Bowraville now seemed like a town where keeping a secret was child's play. She even started knitting of an evening after cleaning Father O'Donohue's little cottage, thinking a solution would present itself somehow. Father O'Donohue knew. Rayleen guessed he had figured out things for himself after seeing how much grief her bad back was causing her. But not once did they exchange a direct word about it.

And now it was June. Months had gone by. She could have solved the problem so easily – town gossip was Mrs Hendry could fix things - but was somehow paralysed into inaction. She'd once seen a horror film where a woman, frozen in fear by the site

of pair of blazing red snake eyes under her camp bed succumbs to death. As her body is retrieved from the tent, her daughter picks up her teddy bear from under the bed. Rayleen felt like the woman in the film: paralysed in fear. Although the general rule was that anyone's business was everyone's business, there were people who knew how easy it was to keep certain things to themselves. Herself for starters. Jude Silber for one. Therese Hendry another. Mrs Hendry had something of a reputation. Everyone around town knew of her charitable work and her committee. In another world she might have even called on Mrs Hendry to say hello and introduce herself. Mrs Hendry was, Rayleen thought, someone of her own kind. A practical woman who got things done. It was strange to think that in a town as small as Bowraville she only knew Mrs Hendry by name; that they had never even had a conversation, but it was true. If only more of Bowraville could be like Mrs Hendry. But as it turned out now, the only ones who could solve her problem were either herself or Mr Jude Silber.

Perhaps she should have told Pete just enough to stop his rage. But he would have known straight away it was a problem that had little to do with him. They hadn't slept together in over a year. Pete seemed to prefer Ponty Beaumont's company on their pig-shooting weekends to her own. She'd be seeing Cha Cha sometime soon. Perhaps now that it was all done, she should tell him. Cha Cha would understand the crushing weight that had stopped her reporting Jude Silber, and had stopped her from telling anyone about her pregnancy. Cha Cha would listen, whereas Pete, probably with Ponty by his side, would do something stupid. The thought of telling Cha Cha made her feel peaceful, less guilty for not grieving more for the girl child lying among the towels. Perhaps if it hadn't been Jude's she would have loved her more. Perhaps then it wouldn't have died inside her. She bit her knuckles and started crying. Who would believe her if she said anything about Jude now? If she'd accused someone like

Thaddeus Shillingsworth it would make better sense. The proof was in the looking. Rayleen's little baby, looking for all the world as if she was just sleeping gently, reminded her of the infants that the Fathers at St Mary's were so intent on clothing in baptismal white, as if the white could somehow hide the truth by fabricating one of different hue. Rayleen sat up a bit and rubbed her hair. She had had a premonition of dread for about a week. She'd noticed lately how still things were, like the river bank behind the Royal before the cicadas were in season and before the next flood. She wasn't so shocked by the still birth, but was by the truth her baby had revealed. She was astounded as to how a secret could lie so much in how you looked. She looked at her own arm, and wondered at the scars and scabs, the freckles and blotches and then thought of her own mother's red and wrinkled skin, never able to adapt to the harsh Queensland light. The sins of the mothers. Jude Silber wasn't as pallid as his grinning face suggested. As she sat on the laundry floor trying to work all these things out, not once did it occur to Rayleen that perhaps she was the one with a past and a mother who had tried to forget. She felt empty and sad that she wouldn't now be going home with a baby, that it would be just herself, and the little black and white devils of guilt and sadness that would flutter behind her.

When she was a little girl in Charleville a family of magpies, about seven aunties with two fluffy grey chicks landed on the sun-seared grass stubble of the back yard. They had been living in a large pepper tree at the back for years. The day was hazy with light but the blackness of their feathers seemed to suck all the light around them, animated vortexes of darkness swirling around their vivid white markings. Rayleen was playing with a stick, sticking it down ant holes, stirring the insects into furious menace, just for something to do. The day was completely silent, except for her ears ringing with her own sense of being alive, and the soft humming of native bees in the jacaranda.

Perhaps the birds thought she was digging grubs, because when they landed they started carolling a cascade of warbles, hoping the performance would earn them a morsel. The birds had coal black curved beaks and staring golden eyes. She charged at them using her stick as a sword. They easily hopped out of the way, not bothering to take flight, and not realising that she meant them any harm. Eventually the whole flock got bored and flew off, disappearing into the heat haze. They never returned. It was only years after she realised how unusual their disappearance was. Magpies stay in the one small locale for generations, and swoop on anyone who threatens them.

Rayleen sat on the laundry floor looking at the bundle for some time, trying to work things out. She looked again. There was no mistaking, you only had to see for yourself. She knew she herself wasn't to blame. Her parents were German migrants. There was no telling what Jude's family had got up to in its black velvety past. Bowraville was full of such stories. The Silbers were well known in the district as one of the pioneer families of the Nambucca. The family had lived in the district since 1869. Rayleen knew as well as anyone the unsaid things that had gone on all through Bowraville's history. It seemed to her that one of the secrets that Bowraville had been keeping so well was the Silber's family tree. The Silbers of Argent's Hill had a district wide reputation for being the coal of discretion. She wondered if Jude Silber had any idea that his family was not all sweetness and white.

She left the bundle on the dirty clothes stack for some hours while she cleaned up and showered, and sat down again to rest. Her legs felt weak. Things had happened fast. She had planned to go by herself to the hospital when the time came, but sometimes things don't turn out the way they are planned. It was only after she had checked the kegs and sat down again with a coffee to steady her trembling body that she carefully wrapped her up in a grey and blue blanket, she had brought home from

Father O'Donohue's with some other laundry. She put the bundle in a shopping basket, and then walked down High Street a few doors to the Hibiscusland Building Society office. On the power line wires outside the pub she thought for a second she saw out of the corner of her eye the family of crows that had left her backyard in Charleville all those years ago, but when she turned her head they were gone. Pale and clammy, her voice hardly audible, she told the teller that she wanted to see the manager personally about making a deposit.

Rayleen had let things happen this way not just through inaction. A fantasy which played in her head was that she would check herself out of the Macksville hospital before Pete found out, book two seats on the coach to Brisbane, and leave Bowraville for good. But now there were two complicating problems. Her baby was still born, and she didn't know what to do. She imagined how people would stare at her as she walked down the street. A burial was needed, and she would have to face the whispers. If she pointed the bone finger at Jude Silber now, who would believe her? Even if she had told Pete and Ponty what had happened, who would believe her? The more she thought about how what had happened to her, the angrier she got. It wasn't her decision that Pete had messed up their finances. It wasn't her decision that horrible man who smelt of cough drops had bent her over the kitchen table in his small neat flat while snarling what did she imagine? A blank fucking cheque? Rayleen felt sick. Her hands were shaking. Even though there had been no pain, indeed no real warning, she realised she was in shock. She half hoped, while sitting on that laundry floor, that Pete would come in and roaring with rage hit her so hard that she would lose consciousness. But she was alive. She was aware. If Pete found out, he'd die of shame. He didn't think much of those that lived just out of town off the South Arm Road. One of his favourite past-times, apart from the pig shooting, was driving along the Rubbish Tip Road on a

Sunday night with Ponty shooting dogs. Perhaps he'd shoot her, a bitch. Everyone knew about the dog shooting. Some people had even made complaints to the Shire, but when Constable Beaumont explained it was a public health and safety issue everyone simply ignored the issue. Most issues in town got ignored. It's how Sam Raymond continued to have his fence policy at the theatre despite all the publicity that had happened when that bus had rolled into town.

Inside his office, Rayleen handed the basket to Jude, who started to fold back the blanket to see what was inside. Rayleen slapped his hand hard and glared at him, her lips drawn in and pale.

"You need to get rid of this ... this problem. Discretely. It's yours. You see, I now know." She nodded her head. "I now know your little secret Mr Fuck-you Silber. Think of what people are going to say." She raised an eyebrow waiting for a response.

Jude blanched. Had she been witness after all to what he was doing on the bridge, the details of which he could hardly remember himself, except in his dreams? His eyes widened and he sat down. He started to say something then stopped himself. There was nothing he could say. Rayleen snorted contemptuously and left him staring at the basket on his desk.

He only peeked after he was sure she was gone. It was obviously not his, of that he was sure. She'd been fooling around with someone at the mish, it seemed. Still, she had him pinned. Constable Beaumont was already interested in him, he could see that. He had been asking lots of questions about Kirsty, who had left him a few days ago to go back to living with Simon. The only problem was, Simon's bike had been found just yesterday on the Horseshoe Road. It was an unfortunate accident, and he had had nothing directly to do with it. And as for Rayleen, he could always say it had been her

choice, but he knew how women twisted the minds of men. He imagined Rayleen, sobbing, having a conversation with Constable Beaumont, telling him how they first met. He'd have to get rid of this basket, and then deal with her. He looked out the office window. Those damned magpies were back again, spying on him.

Six days later, after everything was sorted, Rayleen returned, incoherent, blabbing that of all people, Frypan had not only dug up what Jude Silber had said he would bury, but had gone to the police, and that Jude couldn't keep a secret if his life depended on it. As she yelled at him (how much could the front counter hear?) Jude realised, fighting back the tears burning down his cheeks from Burning Mountain's miasma, that she was absolutely right. He couldn't keep a secret if his life depended on it. He couldn't hear her words above the roar of his own blood. He stopped listening to the sobs, and stared at the wall, trying to visualise the Sako rifle nestled in his car boot.

For nearly two years, Rayleen had had this notion that she could get away, just pack up and leave the place. Just get in the car and drive off without packing anything, sending Pete a postcard from Brisbane or Charleville to say she was not missing, just gone.

She had even tried it a few times, but it never worked out: she always found herself back in Bowraville. The last time was last August, a month before her arrangement with Jude, when she had met him for the very first time. She had got as far as the Rhone's Creek turnoff, but the rings blew so that her car had barely enough power to run at a walking pace. She managed to turn around and get back on the Wilson Road. She turned towards Bowraville hoping to flash her lights for help if there were any other cars. When she rounded a bend, she saw a man standing beside his open boot in the middle of the bridge. She breathed a sigh of belief. She didn't know who the man was, but knew he was local. She wound her window down and asked for a tow.

The man, his arms hanging by his side and breathing heavily, just stood there for a few seconds, before saying "Sure."

"I've got a tow rope," Rayleen had started to say, but the man rummaged in his boot and produced his own. It was hard work chatting to him as he secured the tow rope. He seemed preoccupied with something. She watched his thick pale white hands as they worked to secure the rope to the tow ring. He cursed when he saw he had dirtied them, and when Rayleen offered him her handkerchief to clean himself up, he didn't even thank her, just grabbed it and very carefully cleaned each finger before handing back the soiled cloth. It was only as she sat behind the steering wheel of her car watching his tail lights as they drove back to Bowraville, that she realised who he was. Jude Silber, the man whose first wife had run off a few years previously. It was a loss everyone knew about, and when he had remarried, all of Bowraville had remarked that there was a man who could pick himself up. It was only a few days after the towing incident that gossip had it that his second wife had left him as well. "Too neat and prissy" people would say. Rayleen agreed and said although it was a terrible thing for a wife to just remove herself from someone's life like that, she could understand why.

The discovery on the river bank was a complication that Rayleen hadn't counted on. How long before people found out the truth? She had imagined she'd take the baby with her, but that wasn't to be. Her daydream had been that she would get a coach to Brisbane and then another to Charleville where she would get work as barmaid, and leave Bowraville far behind.

She smiled ruefully to herself. If she'd had the energy she would have dealt with the whole thing herself. Maybe Jude Silber couldn't keep a secret, but she certainly could.

In fact, out of all of Bowraville, the only one to have guessed at her condition over the last few months was Father Tom O'Donohue. Rayleen cleaned his small house by the mish school, and did his cooking and laundry. It was an easy job, as Father O'Donohue's house was tiny, and he had few possessions. All she really had to do was change and wash his bed sheets, sweep the floor, and put away a few books that lay scattered on the lounge. Once when she was bending over, she became momentarily dizzy and Father O'Donohue, looking up from his reading, voiced a conjecture. She pretended to not hear, and it wasn't mentioned directly again. When sitting, looking at her whitened reflection in the washing machine side, Rayleen had thought about this too, but couldn't quite work what exactly he knew. She had turned up at Father O'Donohue's house as if nothing had happened the next day. Perhaps he thought she'd had things fixed. He wouldn't know how far gone she was. Maybe he thought she and Cha Cha had a thing going, but she was always so careful with the bed. She and Cha Cha would lie on the bed, just talking, and afterwards she always changed the sheets as she was meant to do and made the bed with hospital corners, the way her mother had always taught her.

In Charleville, Rayleen's mother had been a nurse, and her father was a groundsman for the golf course in May Street. An only child, Rayleen went to a school, which like most Catholic schools, was also called St Mary's. After finishing high school, Rayleen's mother wanted her to go into nursing, but Rayleen preferred being a casual barmaid at the Carones. She met Pete Newman while working the bar when he was driving to Longreach for a holiday. He persuaded her to follow him back down to the Nambucca, despite her mother's fierce objections. She couldn't understand how her mother could be so against a place she had never even seen, when she herself had travelled to an unknown land half a world away from her home in order to start a new

life. Rayleen wanted to go home, to Charleville, where she was born. She felt Bowraville was not her place, and now never would be. It was now nearly a week since things had spun out of control.

That morning she had argued with Pete over nothing. She wanted to tell him what had happened, but was afraid he wouldn't listen, and wouldn't understand. He and Tommy were about to reroof the pub, when he angrily pointed his finger at her. She realised then that he knew the truth but didn't want it confirmed. She could hear him angrily clanging sheets of corrugated tin when she was backing out of the hotel car park after she had said goodbye.

The Nambucca was swollen, and was coming in and out of flood like waves breaking on a shore. Rayleen could have rung Macksville before leaving to make sure the highway wasn't cut, but she just took her chances, crying all the way. At Macksville she was told cars were finding it rough on the Clybucca flats, but trucks and coaches were still getting through without many problems. She could get on a Brisbane coach in the morning. Not trusting the river to stay down, she decided to spend the night at the Star, and catch the bus from the Caltex near the park. She'd leave the car there - Pete would now have to fix it if he wanted to sell it – and leave Bowraville behind her.

It started raining again so hard when she boarded the bus for Brisbane that she couldn't tell for sure why her face was wet. She sat next to a heavy man who was sweating profusely, and saying how much he had been enjoying the scenery up from Kempsey. Rayleen smiled politely, and then looked out the window, pretending not to hear his chatter. The urge to get away was so fierce it felt like fire in her belly.

As the bus tuned up the highway to Nambucca Heads a small group of black and white birds – magpies - flew almost at eye level in the tall grasses alongside the

road. The sun broke through the dark purple and green pillowing clouds as the bus came to a shuddering halt just past a sign that said Nambucca Heads. The bus engine sighed and the driver got out. Rayleen peered down the aisle. There was a long queue of traffic stalled in front. The bus driver was standing next to a semi, talking to its driver. Passengers were murmuring to each other. A baby started crying. Rayleen's tears welled again, and ran down the inside of her window. Even though it was the middle of June and the middle of winter, the humidity from the rain and the fierce sun shine was making everyone sweat.

"Flood." said the fat man next to her, nodding his head knowingly. "We'll never get through now." He sighed. "I hope we don't have to sleep on the bus tonight."

The driver got back in, started the bus, and carefully easing the bus to the left of the traffic queue drove on the verge until he was in a turning lane into Florence Wilmont Drive.

Rayleen had her eyes shut and looked for all the world as if she was sleeping, her head slightly stooped, and rocking gently back and forward with the motion of the bus when the driver announced, as she knew he would, that they would be taking the Old Coast Road to try to re-join the highway near the Nambucca Heads High School.

"No matter if we can't get through," he said cheerfully. "I'll turn around and go the other way, which gets us to Bowraville. If we get stuck the company has arranged accommodation for everyone at the two Bowraville pubs. Look at it as a free holiday. And Bowraville is a nice and friendly little town. You'll love it."