‘The Snake in the Rock’

and

Meso-physical Journeys: Landscape and Transformation

in Cate Kennedy’s *The World Beneath*, Tim Winton’s

*Dirt Music*, Kate Grenville’s *The Secret River* and

‘The Snake in the Rock’

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Statement of Presentation

This thesis is presented for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy at The University of Western Australia, School of Humanities, English and Cultural Studies, 2015
Novel Abstract: ‘The Snake in the Rock’

‘The Snake in the Rock’ is a multi-focal novel told in a realist style. The narrative follows Felix Fabin’s journey to Sydney in search of personal restitution following the death of his father. Felix is a divorced English medical writer. His father Jozef Fabin was a Polish war orphan from WWII, transported from Germany to London by the Red Cross at the end of the war. Through the description of Felix and Jozef’s encounters in Australia the story argues strongly for the place of stimulus, challenge and personal connection in personal recovery. Both father and son separately undergo constructive transformations in Australia. These transformations come about through both personal connections and through being strongly affected by places — in particular, they are strongly drawn to elements of the Australian natural landscape. The story describes Lena, a 29 year old art historian and failed artist who lives in Bondi; Yasir, an Afghan homeless asylum seeker who is sleeping rough in the caves below Lena’s flat; and Daniel, the elderly owner of a successful Paddington art gallery. These characters share a common background of loss through intergenerational trauma, war or displacement and events in their lives intersect with events in the lives of Felix and Jozef. When Felix's story moves from London to the vivid landscape of the beach suburbs of Sydney's east and Pittwater to Sydney's north, the stories of Lena, Daniel and Yasir connect with his and Felix moves, at last, towards an acceptance of the damage of the past.
Dissertation Abstract: Meso-physical Journeys:

Landscape and Transformation in Cate Kennedy’s *The World Beneath,*

Tim Winton’s *Dirt Music,*

Kate Grenville’s *The Secret River* and

‘The Snake in the Rock’

Cate Kennedy's *The World Beneath,* Tim Winton's *Dirt Music,* Kate Grenville's *The Secret River* and the draft novel that accompanies this dissertation, ‘The Snake in the Rock’ belong to a group of contemporary Australian fiction texts that portray meso-physical journeys — that is, journeys made by characters through Australian ‘natural landscapes’. These novels adopt the narrative strategy of placing characters within Australian bush landscapes in order to stimulate personal change. In these texts, characters make significant journeys to or through a natural landscape and their physical journeys precipitate psychological or spiritual ones. These meso-physical journeys enable release and transformation and result in metanoia, a change of a distinctly spiritual or psychological nature, involving the revision of previously held ideas. Nature causes a confrontational or transforming encounter, enabling a new way of seeing oneself. This in turn enables a release from, acknowledgement of or acceptance of a troubled past. In these contemporary Australian stories, the conceptual renderings of and narrative approaches to place, nature and landscape
are distinctive and the landscape is a complex agent in the process of character change. In emphasising the role of landscape in character transformation, these texts contain an echo of contemporary critical re-readings of colonial settler narratives (Bonyhady, 2000); and of ecocritical interrogations of cultural perceptions of landscape and nature, in which the representation of natural landscapes are a central concern (Glotfelty and Fromm, 1996). They also rework older literary ideas concerning the transformative power of nature, drawing upon, particularly, the views of nature held by the European Romantic writers (Blanning, 2010).
Candidate’s Declaration

This thesis does not contain work that I have published, nor work under review for publication.

Statement of Candidate Contribution

I confirm that this thesis is my own independent research and all research has been carried out without the contribution of any other party.
Acknowledgements

I’m very grateful to my supervisor Brenda Walker for the help and advice she provided during the creation and refinement of this manuscript. Thanks also to Paul, Marlin, Henry and Shar Jones.
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The Snake in the Rock
Chapter 1

Yasir kept his eyes fixed on the horizon line as he walked. At last, he saw the first yellow tinge of dawn appear. In moments, the sky was alight and the ocean appeared to arc away, as if the world was a sheet of paper curling over a naked flame.

Instead of lifting his spirits, the colours of the dawn gave him an unpleasant jolt: he remembered the yellow-grey sky over Spin Boldak, near Kandahar, on the day his family’s house was destroyed. That was the day his first life ended.

He crossed the quiet Bondi street. Before him: that yellow sky. The sea.

When the bomb went off, the explosion lifted Yasir into the air, flinging him against his neighbour’s wall. Sound turned to feeling, bodies turned to air. There was only impact and noise.

Yes, he thought now, as he walked. I came so close to death and yet there was no flash, revealing the faces of the gods. No sublime moment of flight. No sir.

The bomb was tucked in a suicide bomber’s rucksack. Much later, when Yasir came to his senses after the explosion, he learned from a fellow evacuee that there was something unusual about this bombing; the boy had left his motorcycle idling in the lane before striding into the square and triggering the detonation. It was the idling motorbike that troubled Yasir now, as it had before. Had the boy hoped that the flimsy plastic explosives might fail? Did he imagine himself returning to the bike and driving back to the house he shared with his mother, to share the miracle of his release from martyrdom? It filled Yasir with
sadness, this final gesture of a boy who was afraid to die; or who was, in some private chamber of his mind, not quite convinced of the possibility of death.

Yasir was evacuated to the military hospital at the refugee camp over the border in Pakistan. His second life began. The nurses told him that when he was found, prayers were said for the miracle that had kept his limbs attached to his body.

The house was rubble. For a long while, he was as good as dead.

Now, in Sydney, Australia, Yasir picked up speed as he rounded the corner of Bondi Road, heading towards the sea. This was his third life. He made his way, still stepping softly, across the grass towards the cliffs. This life required the lightest of treads.

He noticed the rocky ledge that jutted below the waterfront lookout and clambered down to it. The sandstone was grainy and cool underfoot and the wind was cold against his face. Once he reached the ledge he stopped to catch his breath, staring out to sea. He watched sun rise above the horizon and, finally, felt his spirits lift.

He cupped his hands to his mouth and warmed them with his breath. Hope, he thought. We’re hard-wired for it. He turned his back to the sun and watched light illuminate the ancient shape of the rock face behind him.

Then he noticed the cave.
Chapter 2

At the age of twelve, Daniel Fabin discovered that his father Jozef could not be trusted. With no mother to allay his fear and no siblings to share it with, Daniel shouldered this difficult insight alone. It was 1989.

Daniel's father had always been prone to making speeches. He had heard Jozef's speech on behaving honourably; also the one on being worthy of trust and keeping one’s word. Jozef was eloquent on recognising the seriousness of one’s place in the world and accepting responsibility in a time of shirkers.

To Daniel these speeches were confusing. Jozef was unhappy — anyone could see that. But something had lately made things worse. Jozef was becoming hard to take. In this worsening, Daniel saw the traitor his father would become.

At first, pity at his father’s condition, rather than anger, settled in Daniel’s chest. He knew his father’s history. Jozef had been found, a starving and terrified orphan, by a group of American GIs who stopped their requisitioned Leyland to take a piss against an old stone barn near Köln, in March of 1945. They took him to the Displaced Person’s camp at Brauweiler. He spoke Polish, when he spoke at all. When no relatives could be traced, the Red Cross arranged for a Quaker family in London to take him. Peter and Aubrey Chisholm, the earnest teenagers who were to be his adoptive brothers, waited on the platform at Paddington station for Jozef in the rain, with a honey sandwich wrapped in a page of the *Times*. 
We’ll never forget that day, Peter Chisholm had told Daniel. It was raining cats and dogs and the sandwich was ruined before we could unwrap it. But we knew what Jozef meant. He meant the future.

What future, exactly? Daniel wondered. Now, in the middle of 1989, the whole of Europe was caught up in a struggle for change. People raged against the wall that split Germany. For the young people caught in a divided world, the wall belonged to the conflicts of the past.

The spirit of freedom was asserting itself outside of Europe too, pushing up against the restrictions of the past: Daniel and his classmates sang for Nelson Mandela’s release, happily ignorant of their own country’s role in Africa’s bloody history.

All over the world, the cry was the same: an end to borders; down with tyranny! Daniel felt it.

But Jozef, remained untouched. Jozef seemed to exist as a child exists — in a private world, a world of miniature concerns where feelings dominate; where one’s immediate frustrations are paramount. Thus, when the rest of Europe urged peace and freedom, openness and change Daniel observed a deepening of old hates in Jozef. A worsening of black moods; a turning away.

It was early July. Long evenings drifted slowly into nights; Daniel and Jozef’s West Dulwich neighbours spent these languorous times in their long gardens, drinking and laughing. Banished to bed while the late sun lingered in the garden, Daniel would lie in his first floor bedroom off the landing of their narrow Georgian house in Dulwich Common and listen to the creak of boards beneath his father’s restless feet in the bedroom above. Back and forth his father paced.
Despite the Chisholm’s kindness, Daniel saw that his father remained cold, as if all the Chisholm’s love had failed to overcome Jozef’s tendency towards solipsism. Daniel consoled himself that he knew what to expect from Jozef, at least. He had developed a new clear sightedness regarding his father.

Jozef would only tighten; he would only draw further away. Daniel had grown used to the idea that there was a part of his father that remained closed to him: now he saw that this part of his father might claim Jozef completely, like a desert that spreads outwards, transforming habitable landscapes into zones where life could barely survive.

He saw that he must learn to live without warmth from Jozef. His father’s love was delivered in small parcels, papered in the language of moral approval. Jozef was better, on the whole, at illuminating failures. That was his gift. And with no-one to keep them from falling into habitual arguments, Daniel and his father were like coins spinning in dish, each turn bringing them closer to collision.

Then, one morning Jozef announced he was leaving.

Something had come up, said Jozef. Family business. It couldn't be avoided; he would explain more later.

Daniel saw he was being fobbed off with a pallid quarter-truth. The heat in Jozef’s face as he told Daniel his plans betrayed him: Jozef’s agitation was proof of a sinister and untold reality. What was really happening? Wasn't he old enough to know?
But Jozef was an expert secret keeper. Against his father’s iron-bound defences, Daniel stood no chance. Jozef shared the basics about his trip and kept the details utterly to himself. He was flying to Sydney, he said. An old friend had arranged to put him up. Once he was there — well, he couldn’t say. Daniel would stay here in London with his friend Salil. The arrangement would see him through the school holidays. That part, at least, was understood.

Daniel was not appeased by the prospect of time at his friend’s house. Under other circumstances, a stay at the Rao’s would have been a welcome change from the grimness of Dulwich with Jozef. But Jozef’s secretive behavior was alarming and it led Daniel to see, incontrovertibly, that his father was sliding away from him. How could Daniel have failed to see this coming? He thought about begging his father to stay but the idea only embarrassed him. He imagined Jozef blushing at such an inexplicable display.

The day before Jozef’s departure, after brisk and restrained goodbyes Peter Chisholm drove Daniel to the house of Salil Rao in his damp-smelling Mini-Cooper. Salil was Daniel’s best friend from school, a champion chess player and a masterful cheat.

Peter tried to cheer him up as they drove. ‘Your father thought you’d be happy to spend the holidays at your friend’s house.’

‘How long for? The whole summer holiday?’ July and August stretched before him.

Peter shrugged. ‘Not sure yet.’

Daniel scowled and sunk into his seat. ‘You and Aubrey always take his side.’

‘What do you mean?’
'You go along with him. When you shouldn’t.'

At this, Peter fell silent.

In truth, Daniel was a little scandalised at his own impudence. He wouldn’t normally dare to speak this way to an adult. But it was true: the Chisholm uncles still regarded Jozef as the desperate orphan they first met at Paddington Station. Their image of his father was fixed.

‘We thought you’d understand,’ Peter replied, at last.

‘Why’s he going to Australia?’ This single, perplexing piece of information made no sense.

Peter squinted at the road. ‘It's where he has to go.’

Daniel rolled his eyes. The adults in his world were prone to making empty statements disguised as insight.

The following day Daniel woke on the camp bed in Salil’s bedroom and discovered his pity for his father had turned to rage. He was as angry as a wasp in a jar.

All day, it did not abate. When the afternoon began to grow colder and he found himself alone in the Rao’s garden with pieces of Salil’s tent spread on the grass before him, he felt exhausted.

The tent was taking too long. It was difficult. There were no instructions. If his father was here — but he stopped himself. There was no point in thinking about Jozef when his father was quite out of reach.
Daniel frowned and stood up slowly, brushing grass seeds from his clothes. He stretched his legs and squinted up at the darkening sky. It was getting late.

Looking down at his muddy knees, he saw that he’d been kneeling in the grass for so long there were criss-cross lines on his shins. He scratched at the scarlet insect bite on his leg and his fingers came away sticky. The bite had reached the oozing stage, past the time when you ought to stop scratching, when you knew you were making it worse. His wiped his hands on his shorts and felt a familiar listlessness begin to settle over him.

In the school holidays every day felt like a Sunday, shapeless and saggy. You woke up feeling excited but by lunchtime you were going out of your mind with boredom. Today had passed too slowly, the hours dragging by. Now it was teatime and they’d never get the tent up by sundown at this rate. And where was Salil?

Daniel looked at the tent poles laid out in neat parallels on the hummocky grass, the geometric pattern of them a pleasing thing. The chess champion Bobby Fisher once said: *I see the patterns when I play. The answer is there; you just discover it.* Daniel liked the idea that answers were all around him. It made a change from problems.

The garden hummed. Dusk insects stirred in the overgrown hedge. The day’s warmth hung in the air. He picked up two of the steel poles and slotted them together, then shoved the spiky end into the ground. It felt good to stab at something. He pulled the spike out and did it a few more times.

‘Is it up yet?’

He heard the back door bang and turned to see Salil jogging towards him.
‘What does it bloody look like?’ The swearing felt good. He wasn’t allowed to do that at home. At Salil’s, the adults swore all the time.

Salil came to a breathless halt next to him and opened his palm to reveal a cigarette.

‘My mum left her handbag in the kitchen.’

Daniel wiped his nose on his sleeve. ‘My dad says only idiots smoke.’

He cast a quick glance at Salil, who was striking a match, the cigarette gripped between his teeth. It was better not to mention his dad at all, had he forgotten?

He let the metal stake drop through his fingers onto the grass and walked past Salil towards the old wooden gate that led to Hampstead Heath.

‘The perverts come out at night.’

Salil’s voice carried from behind the gate. Daniel heard Salil choke and cough. He walked further, through the itchy knee-length grass of the Heath.

The sun was low now. The sky seemed smaller than it should. The noises of the city were far away. The questions he’d been trying not to ask flew into his head: what was the real reason for his father’s departure? Why had he, Daniel, been left?

His thoughts drifted and he found himself drawn back to a certain chain of reasoning that he’d been lately puzzling over. Daniel held two ideas to be true. The first was about time. He realised that time could contract and stretch, soft as chewing gum. It wasn’t regular and reliable, as clocks would have you believe, but uneven and prone to confusing distortions. He saw, for instance, that the events of the future could spring themselves upon you. A person might believe
he had a little extra time up his sleeve — time to prepare, to think about what was to come — only to discover that the future he’d been dreading had arrived.

It hardly seemed possible to Daniel that he’d ever believed that life metered itself in minutes, days and years. The idea seemed so flimsy, in fact, he doubted even the adults believed it.

The second idea made things worse and he had come to regret its discovery. It was simply that people didn’t change much. A person’s oddness might become predictable. They would just be more *themselves* — as if the process of ageing boiled off any diluting factors. He saw it plainly. People could lose all influence over you if you knew how they might behave. If you became used to disappointment, you could prepare yourself.

No one else could know these things, he reasoned, because his ideas were the result of hours of glum, private thinking — on the bus to school or during stuporous Friday assemblies, when Mr Hall droned through the list of sporting honours for the week. He was certain that he alone could have such complex, peculiar thoughts. He allowed himself to savour the God-like power of having created something. It felt good. He imagined the notions as turbines inside him, emitting their own potent energy.

For weeks, the ideas had been in the back of his mind, nesting in the folds of other thoughts. But when his uncle Peter told him that his father was leaving, Daniel thought: I knew he would, it was only a matter of time. There were his twin truths, filling him up with their nasty power.

Now Daniel felt a surge of pure heat. He had been cheated. *School holidays at your friend’s house.* He didn’t believe it for a second: Jozef was gone. And for how long?
He turned as Salil came crashing through the grass behind him.

‘You want a pervert to get you.’

‘Fuck off.’

Daniel spun around and pushed his friend hard. Salil folded in the middle, as if he was hinged at the waist. It happened so fast Daniel lost his footing and he and Salil crashed into the long grass. Sharp stalks grazed his cheek; under his shoulder something hard bit into his skin as they tumbled.

Salil pulled away. Daniel grabbed a handful of Salil’s jacket and heard a rip. He felt a winding kick in the guts in return.

‘You idiot! Mum’ll kill me for tearing this. And I’ve dropped the cigarette!’

Salil stood up, his hair full of grass ends and dirt. He stooped to pick something out of the grass then straightened up, the bent cigarette in his hand.

Daniel let his head fall back onto the grass. Clouds hurried past above, dirty white against the washed-out evening sky. Tears came — traitor tears, pouring out in a rush down the sides of his face.

Then the tears stopped and his stomach hardened. He wiped his face and sat up.

He heard the strike of a match, then smelt a waft of smoke. Salil clumped over to him. He blew smoke rings into the air, his bottom jaw shaping the ‘o’.

‘Stupid prick.’

‘Sorry.’

He meant it: he wasn’t himself. He made a show of brushing grass seeds off his jumper.
He stood up, took the butt of the lit cigarette from Salil’s fingers and sucked hard. It was disgusting and made his head spin and then he was choking and spluttering, just like Salil.

Salil started laughing. Daniel felt a smoky giggle escape, which caused more vile coughing.

Salil gave his shoulder a shove. ‘You should be ashamed of yourself, Daniel.’

Daniel heard the way Salil used his name: hard, as if an accusation would inevitably follow. Salil had used his name the way his dad would. Jozef’s voice came to him: Daniel, stand up straight. Daniel tell the truth.

He ground out the cigarette in the grass, the way he’d seen the older kids do it at school. Facing Salil, he crossed his arms. An idea was spinning inside his head.

‘I’m changing my name.’

‘To what?’

Daniel bit his lip. Changing his name would show his father he was his own man. Heart racing, he saw the possibilities that a new name might offer. The right name would gather its own momentum, shove him forward.

‘Just Felix. It’s my middle name. I can use my middle name, can’t I?’ Felix, in memory of his mother, Felicity. Jozef told him that he had chosen that name so Daniel would honour her by his very existence every day. Well, let him see how I honour her now, Daniel thought.

He pushed past Salil and walked slowly through the garden to the back step. In the past, he and Salil had talked about the kind of name that marked you
as being destined for adventure: Buster, Buck or Blake. But Felix would have to do for now.

Salil called after him. ‘You can’t!’

‘Yes I can. I just did.’ He walked on.

He spat nicotine into the grass then stepped up onto the back stair.

Salil climbed the step and stood beside him. He cleared his throat, his expression careful.

‘Let’s put up the tent. We could do it fast while it’s still light.’

Felix shrugged. ‘No, let’s watch telly.’

He pulled open the back door. Salil led the way into the warm house.
Chapter 3

Felix would have preferred to see another birthday on its way with a quiet pint in the local pub. It was 2010 and he was thirty-three; the birthday wasn’t even a milestone. But Salil, with his usual knack for misreading the subtle social cues around him, decided that this birthday should involve a bit of ceremony. After everything that had happened, he said.

In the end, they reached a compromise. It would be just the two of them at Miro, the tapas restaurant. Felix should have objected — surely Salil could see that the place belonged to a different time in their lives? But Felix hadn’t had the energy to argue with Salil and so Miro it was, with its flamenco guitar, its plates of tapas and its cheap sangria.

When Felix arrived at the restaurant he was already glum at the prospect of Salil’s false cheer and his attempts at psychoanalysis. Felix looked around. The tawdry Marbella holiday décor was depressing. The noise was overwhelming. Hadn’t they noticed all this before?

He followed the waiter to the empty table and sat down. Salil was late, naturally.

The place was still a popular choice for students, he saw. Rowdy tables of large groups lined the walls on both sides. He felt glad of his table’s position in the shadow of the crimson-painted wall. He hadn’t been out much lately. If he’d been forced into one of the brightly lit booths, he’d have felt as naked as a peeled egg.

It was odd to be going out alone. He was used to being with someone. For six birthdays, he’d had Kate by his side — Kate, his wife; who would soon, once formalities were in place, become an ex-wife. The term held unpleasant
connotations for Felix. The prefix ‘ex’, reminded him of excision. Cutting off, cutting someone loose. That, he supposed, was what she wanted.

Then there was Jozef, his father. For the last three months he’d scarcely left his father’s house while he watched cancer strip Jozef to the bone. The hospital had simply said: make him comfortable. So he stayed with Jozef day and night, moving back into the Dulwich house to simplify things.

Now, Felix reflected, he was quite alone. He hailed the waiter.

‘Sangria, please.’

The carafe landed swiftly on the checked tablecloth. Felix poured himself a glassful and took a large swig. It was typically potent.

A moment later Salil slipped, grinning, into the chair opposite. He filled his glass.

‘Bottoms up, birthday boy.’

‘Cheers.’

‘You made it through the funeral.’

‘Just.’ He would rather not to think about it.

‘What’s it like being in the house alone?’

‘Creepy.’

He was aware that he was being taciturn. He didn’t want to tell Salil that he couldn’t set foot in his old bedroom without triggering unsettling memories. Strongest of all was the memory of coming home from boarding school, aged thirteen, full of inchoate rage at Jozef who, after leaving suddenly, had all but vanished for nearly six months. That Christmas, in 1989 — when Felix had just about learned to do without his father — back Jozef came to collect his son, offering no explanation and sporting a mysterious tan. Teenaged Felix had
dumped his school bag on his old bed and tried put his fist through the bedroom window.

Jozef had always been cagey. But you had to hand it to him: Jozef’s stubborn silence on the details of those missing months was his greatest feat of retention.

‘When do you want to hand over the key?’ Salil tried to catch his eye across the table.

‘Tuesday. Same day I fly.’

‘By the way, Kate sends her love. She hopes you’re getting on OK.’

‘Big of her.’

‘I’ll tell her you said thanks.’

‘Tell her whatever you like.’

Salil ignored his chagrin. ‘I’ll get menus. It’s practically self-serve these days. Next thing we’ll be frying our own tortillas.’

Felix watched him go. Salil still had the awkward, bounding energy Felix remembered from their childhood — as if his body couldn’t quite contain him. He looked down into the dregs of his glass. He’d need to slow down on the booze; the stuff went down too easily. He had packing to do.

His thoughts returned to his childhood bedroom in Jozef’s house. There was still something claustrophobic about that room — it collected fragments of the past like lint. When he moved back in there to help his father nearly three months ago, the posters were still on his bedroom wall from when he’d left to go to university.

He pulled his duffel bag onto his lap and fumbled inside it for a slim plastic wallet. He pulled it out and placed it on the table, and ran a fingertip over
the embossed logo of the travel agent. Real paper airline tickets, not the e-kind. Very old-school. Very Jozef.

Perhaps Jozef had sensed that something was wrong with his health, before the illness truly took hold. Perhaps he’d just felt time running out. Either way, he’d shown a terrible prescience; before he fell sick Jozef booked two tickets to Sydney. He approached Felix about it carefully, one night over dinner. Come with me, Jozef said. Give me a chance to explain what happened back then. He meant 1989; he meant to share, at last, the story of those missing months.

Felix was irritated. What was the point of an explanation now, when it had been years? They had both worked hard to put the past behind them. Couldn’t Jozef let things be? Yet Felix knew the offer was an attempt to mend old wounds. It would have been cruel to refuse.

That was typical Jozef, Felix thought groggily: once he’d made up his mind, there was no going back. It had taken a strong person to stand up to him. Now he upended his glass and swallowed the shards of apple and pear from the bottom of his glass and refilled it. One more wouldn’t hurt. He flipped open the plastic wallet and pulled out the tickets.

Felix agreed to the trip. Jozef wanted it; so it would be. They would travel to Sydney together and Felix would indulge Jozef in his wish.

But Jozef fell sick. When the local GP urged Jozef to see a specialist, Jozef pleaded for a referral to an oncologist who wasn’t known to his colleagues at King’s College Medical School. It was Salil who managed to pull strings and get Jozef an urgent appointment with one of the city’s best practitioners; and it was Salil who refused to listen to Jozef’s protestations on the matter. With
respect, Salil told Jozef, what’s most important now is that we find you the best advice available.

To Felix, Salil had issued a private warning. Stomach cancers take them quick, he said. Don’t count on making that trip with the old man.

When Jozef received his diagnosis, both Felix and Salil were by his side. The morning of the oncologist’s appointment dawned cold and bright. A February cold snap had kept Jozef indoors all week and during the drive across town to Harley Street Felix sensed his father’s extreme agitation. They passed a jittery ten minute wait in the foyer of the consulting rooms by attempting the Times crossword. Jozef endured the chatter of the receptionist’s FM radio with customary irritation, which Felix took to be a good sign. Yet once they were ushered into the specialist’s consulting room and seated on the burgundy leather chairs, Felix saw that Jozef was trembling.

The oncologist wasted no time with banter: Jozef’s illness was incurable. They spent a distressed hour in the room, reviewing Jozef’s tests. Salil was first to find his voice: he asked detailed medical questions and listed attentively to the explanations. Jozef scarcely uttered a word.

That afternoon, once Salil and Felix had helped Jozef from the car and made him comfortable in the warm living room, they shared a hurried glass of whiskey in the kitchen, talking in whispers.

Salil squeezed his shoulder. ‘You alright? No, of course you’re not alright.’

Felix shook his head. He couldn’t speak. Jozef’s fear of dying had become his own.
Salil left him with a promise to get a second opinion. He would ask around, get some names. But Felix knew it was no use. After a second whiskey and a third, he allowed himself to think of the trip to Sydney. Of course, there would be no trip, no revelations. No moment when all the upsets of the past would become comprehensible.

Now Felix bent to reach into his bag again, pulled out a faded A4 yellow envelope and placed it on the table. Salil returned with menus, then picked up the envelope and emptied its contents carefully onto the restaurant table. Out spilled a gallery catalogue, *Valerie Dawson: Paintings* by Daniel Faber. Salil retrieved an old brittle newspaper clipping from inside the front cover and studied it.

The morning after their visit to the oncologist, Jozef came downstairs with the same envelope in his hands. Jozef told Felix to sit down at the polished oak dining table, the same table where Felix had spent so many afternoons puzzling over homework. Jozef emptied the two items envelope carefully onto the table then handed the items one by one to Felix.

‘Back in 1989, I received this newspaper picture, from my friend Joyce in Sydney. This man is the reason I went to Australia,’ Jozef said, pointing to the man in the newspaper photograph. ‘And this is my friend Joyce. I may not have mentioned her.’

‘You didn’t.’ Felix leant his elbows on the table and studied the blurry picture.

‘Well.’ Jozef cleared his throat. ‘I suppose I’ll need to tell you the whole story now. It's not what I wanted.’
‘No, I know.’

‘This man owns a gallery. That's his name on the catalogue, Daniel Faber.’

Spoken aloud, Felix heard how close the name sounded to theirs. Felix felt a jolt: Daniel Fabin, Jozef's brother, was killed in the war just days before Jozef was rescued. But Jozef sensed his train of thought and interjected.

‘I know what you’re thinking. It’s not that. He’s not my long-lost brother.’

‘Right.’

‘I saw my brother Daniel — Danek we called him — being murdered, you know. No mystery there.’

‘Oh Dad, I'm sorry.’ This was news.

Jozef brushed away the sympathy. ‘But you’re on the right track. I know this man from that time, see. I’ve kept things from you. It was wrong.’ He was talking fast now. ‘This may be hard to accept. Far-fetched, even.’

‘What?’ Felix’s head was swimming. All the stories his teenaged self had dreamed up to explain his father's disappearance — a secret job, another family — now seemed absurd.

‘I believe it's the same person who killed my brother when we were boys, just before the war ended. You can’t imagine: it was anarchy. This boy — this man — killed my brother Daniel then stole his papers and his name and escaped. I know he got away because I saw him at the docks when I was making the journey to London.’
A moment of silence followed, allowing Felix to turn this notion over in his mind.

‘Did you see Daniel Faber in Sydney?’ He kept the shock from his voice.

In revealing the secret that had caused them so much grief Jozef was providing the answer, at last, to a long-ago question. The dropped stone, turning through the years, had struck the dirt at the bottom of the well.

Jozef folded the paper carefully and placed the items back inside the envelope. ‘Oh, yes. I saw him. It damn near killed me. I went a bit mad, I suppose.’

With that, Jozef turned and shuffled towards the doorway. Then he turned back to face Felix.

‘You see, it’s not as if I’d waited my life to find him. But I knew I would recognise him if I did. And then he turned up. I was bound to seek him out. Had to. There’s more to tell, of course.’ He turned away and continued out the door.

Felix listened as his father slowly climbed the stairs.

Felix looked across as Salil pushed the yellow envelope back across the table towards him and leaned back into his seat. If there was more to know, Felix never heard it. Jozef’s state worsened quickly; the moment never came and Felix hadn’t pushed for it. Truthfully, he didn’t know what to make of Jozef’s revelation.

He looked over to Salil. ‘You think it’s madness?’
'Sorry. But yes, I do.' Salil gave him a level stare. ‘I don’t need to tell you but Jozef was very sick. Who knows how long he hadn’t been quite right.’

Indignant heat rose in Felix’s cheeks. ‘He was completely lucid until the end, Salil. You saw him.’

‘I saw a man who was in a hurry to tie up loose ends. Perhaps he saw connections that weren’t there.’

‘He said he was bound to go after Daniel Faber.’

‘So?’

‘It’s how I feel now. Bound.’ Felix reached for the items hurriedly and put them carefully back into Jozef’s envelope. ‘You won’t take the other ticket? They’ll let me sign it over, I asked.’

‘Sit in a dead man’s seat? Sorry.’

‘Don’t be callous.’

‘Seriously. I can’t get the time off work.’

Felix shrugged. He knew Salil’s hours at Great Ormond Street Children’s Hospital were unpredictable.

Salil leaned in. 'Don't get me wrong, Felix. But you do get to choose. You’re not obliged — bound, as you call it. Go, by all means. Find out about your dad. But would it be so bad to just take a bloody holiday?’

Felix looked up and saw Salil was smiling at him. He raised his glass and felt the room spin a little. He was going, in truth, because he hadn’t figured out what else to do. No wife. No father. But Salil didn’t need to know that.
Felix checked the kitchen windows and the Yale lock on the back door of the Dulwich house. Then he leapt the stairs two at a time, his feet falling naturally into the worn places on the carpet. He went into his old bedroom on the first floor, lifted his large black duffel bag and dark suede jacket from the bed and carried them downstairs. On the landing, he noticed the smell of the house — a combination of dust and trapped cooking odours and disinfectant. Stasis and neglect. He felt a stab of sadness for Jozef, for the man’s troubled life as well as his death. It caused him to pause, overwhelmed.

That morning, he shredded the last of Jozef’s miscellaneous papers: the old King’s College calendars, discards and duplicates from Jozef’s library of medical journals — *Annals of Anatomy* and *The Lancet* and others he couldn’t name, all yellow with age. He walked softly through the living room, anticipating the creak of the boards beneath the carpet — by the door, in front of the sideboard. He developed the knack of it during the months he’d spent nursing Jozef. But as he stepped through the house today, he stepped carefully because the old-man groan of the boards caused him to think obliquely about the warping of age.

As he carried the last box of papers through the doorway to the porch into the morning sun, the glare caught him square in the face. He closed his eyes and watched as dancing stars skidded across black. Perhaps this is what you see when you die, he’d thought, grimacing. The constellations, beaming you up. Turning you into cosmic dust. He descended the concrete porch steps slowly. In the distance, he heard the half-hour bells from St Stephens up on College Road.

Jozef had devoted himself to the garden. The shrubs bloomed according to schedule: pinks with pinks, yellows with yellows and so on. Weeds were
When he was small, Felix observed his father in the garden and, by degrees, he came to understand something. In the slow unfolding logic of children, he saw that untidy things were not to be trusted. Weeds were untidy, also slugs and snails. Fungi and rot and badgers could wreak havoc in a single busy night. It followed that untidy things included certain emotions, which rarely seemed to behave properly. Feelings expanded and shrunk, or changed altogether. For example, sometimes he felt a big loneliness but that was a secret and was tucked away inside while Jozef got upset about Felix stuttering and biting his nails, which were mentioned often as being *very important* although Felix could hardly see why.

Kate said the garden was Jozef’s attempt to overcome the chaos that had been wrought in his life; and he could never win against nature. But Felix knew that wasn’t the point. Jozef had always insisted that it was *in the struggle* that you proved yourself.

When Felix reached the recycling bin, he opened the lid and upended the box. Thousands of pieces of shredded paper tumbled into the bin with a dry rustle. Stray shreds fell onto his shoes and spilled over the sides of the bin. He gave the box a final hard shake and paper scattered around the bin. He stared at the mess for a moment, stupidly transfixed at the elegance of it until a tingling sensation caused the hairs to rise on the back of his neck. Here was the sum of his father’s life, in paper strands. It was too private, too awful.
At last, feeling foolish, he turned back to the house, wishing to the heavens that he’d had enough presence of mind, at least, to remember where he left his sunglasses.

The trill of his mobile phone brought him out of his reverie on the stairway landing. He saw Salil’s name flash up on the display. He jogged the last of the stairs and dropped the bag near the front door.

‘Salil. I’m nearly done.’

‘Don’t worry, I can always check the house.’

‘See you at the station.’

He hung up, put on his jacket, and stepped back out into the sunlit porch with the bags. He pulled the front door closed behind him and locked it. But instead of lifting the bag to his shoulder and walking to the gate he stopped and leaned against the door, his head tilted back and his eyes raised to the greyish sky.

He took in the finality of the moment; he held in his mind, for a dizzying second, the knowledge that he was entering a future where his ties to people were few. He was leaving a life behind. His new existence seemed weightless.

He closed his eyes. Against the blackness, white paper snow fell in thin, pleasing lines. It felt good to leave the place. He didn’t want to think about Jozef and his childhood in a sentimental way; he knew the man his father was. No more, no less.

He opened his eyes, hoisted his bag to his shoulder and stepped away from the door. He wasn’t entirely alone. He had Salil; he had work. After a long break, it would feel good to get back to work again too. Niamh, his editor at *Science Now* had said: ‘If all the relaxing gets you down, you could send us a
Sydney piece. Maybe cochlear implants?’ He had some cash, thanks to Jozef, but not the sort of money that would last for long. He would send Niamh her story.

He walked through the gate and in the direction of Dulwich railway station.

‘Hey!’

He turned. Salil was on the opposite side of the road walking towards him, waving his arms.

Felix and Salil boarded the train at Dulwich station and travelled west across London. At Paddington they shouldered their way through the commuter crowd and joined the train to Heathrow Airport. Felix let his head fall against the train window and watched his friend’s foot tap restlessly against the dirty lino of the floor. The carriage swayed and the air brakes hissed as they slowed down. When the train emerged from underground, they saw that the day had turned sour and light grey rain had begun to fall.

Felix got to his feet. ‘We’re here.’

The Heathrow Airport sign slid past the window. Salil joined him tugging at the bags in the rack above. Then they stood at the door next to the open window and waited for the train to stop. That smell, thought Felix — of diesel and something from another era, creosote or tar — I’d recognise it anywhere.

As the train came to a halt, he glimpsed the familiar face of Kate, his ex-wife, waiting on the platform.

‘Oh Christ. You didn’t.’ He sent Salil a desperate look.

Salil peered out and whistled through his teeth. ‘Oh good, she came.’

Felix winced. ‘You should have told me.’
But the look he received in reply silenced him. Don’t push it; don’t be a total arsehole, it said. She’s been patient with you.

He stepped down onto the platform, dragging the bag behind him. Kate stood before him, her hands in her pockets and her smile fading.

‘Hello,’ she said, her jaw tight. She took his laptop bag from Salil, looking up at Felix. ‘Surprise.’

At that moment, Felix felt things begin to unravel. Fatigue and apprehension loosened his joints and he experienced a sudden lack of faith in words. He followed Salil and Kate, half-listening to Salil question Kate about her day. He issued silent thanks to Salil for saving him from small talk. The air on the platform was warm and stale and suffocating and he felt a sudden and desperate urge to get above ground again. He pushed ahead and led them to the escalators.

He steered them to the Departures concourse and located the British Airways desk. He left Kate and Salil waiting at a bank of plastic chairs next to the Costa café and joined the queue for check-in. He glanced back. Kate had her face turned away from him and her long hair fell in a curtain. Hair the colour of hazelnuts, he thought, wondering if he had once told her that. Or was it something he had simply meant to tell her and hadn’t? Perhaps, he thought shamefully, he had heard someone else say it.

Once his luggage had been checked in and his boarding pass obtained, he returned to Kate and Salil. They turned to look up at him.

‘All done.’ The chime of his voice reminded him of his father. Brisk, reassuring in a hollow sort of way. He was dry-mouthed; he felt too hot.
Salil got to his feet in a single, springing move. ‘To the bar? My shout,’ he said.

‘You always pay.’

Salil grinned and turned his back, leading the way through the throng. Felix turned back to Kate. She stood quickly and he found himself face to face with her. She continued fiddling with the strap of her bag across her shoulders, eyes searching his face and he was caught, he could see, in an unavoidable moment of intimacy. He noticed the details of her face that had always held a secret meaning: the smile lines around her lips, the point of her nose. A certain vein.

She shrugged her shoulders. ‘Well?’

He put an arm around her waist, tentatively. She softened against him and he led her after Salil like that, bumping into things. He kissed her nutty hair, the smell of her just as he remembered. They passed under the neon lights and he wondered, absently, how the place could be so bright and so gloomy at the same time.

He winced as she pinched his thigh hard through his jeans.

‘You didn’t want me to come to the airport,’ she said.

‘Did too.’

‘Lying dog. You don’t have to go, you know.’

‘I want to go. Did you see the lawyer?’

‘I said I would, didn’t I?’ She offered a pale smile. ‘You’ll get the papers when you get back.’

‘You can send them on to me if you want. I’ll give you the Sydney hotel address.’
‘No hurry. Or can’t you wait?’ She raised questioning eyebrows.

‘How’s Pete? Still employee of the month?’

She gave him a hard look. ‘Don’t.’

They stopped, pulled apart.

He watched her as she thrust her hands into the pockets of her satin bomber jacket. Felix felt something small but significant giving way: it was the thin hope he’d nurtured that they might be able to patch things up.

She stared back at him, her chin thrust out a little.

Salil stood at the entrance to the bar.

Felix stepped aside to allow Kate to go ahead. ‘Send the papers to me in Sydney. I’ll email you the address,’ he said.

Kate turned to him as they entered the bar. Her hard voice carried over the noise. ‘You’ll never get to the bottom of Jozef. What fucked him up. You see that, don’t you?’

Felix stared at her and saw the hurt and anger in her eyes.

Felix said his goodbyes quickly because he felt certain he would say things to Kate that were the wrong thing to say; and to say them now would only remind them both of how things had gone badly, when they might have worked out better. To say such things would also expose the lie that their separation was her true choice. It was simpler for everyone if he stuck to the official version of their story, which was that his emotional ineptitude ruined a good thing. Kate's affair was merely a response. This way he shouldered the blame and Kate was allowed the dignity she felt the relationship had denied her.
He passed through passport control and the officer handed him back his documents, saying:

‘Thank you, Daniel.’

Daniel. Hearing his old name — still his, legally — gave him a jolt, the way it always did. He felt his father’s absence keenly. He rubbed his face on his sleeve, made his way down the gangway to the cabin on seasick legs. Kate was right: why try to make sense of everything now?

Ten minutes later, buckling his seatbelt, he marvelled at how easy it was to finish one life and begin another. But it felt like freefall. Like slipping through time and gathering speed and when — if — he stopped, he’d be a different person, rearranged at the atomic level.

He sat back and listened to the roar of the engines. He reached for the envelope of Jozef’s papers. He took out the art catalogue and smoothed his hand across the cover. *Valerie Dawson: Paintings* by Daniel Faber. Who the hell was Valerie Dawson? The newspaper clipping was tucked neatly inside the cover, just as it had been for so many years.

See? Look, Jozef had said, pointing to both instances of the man’s name, so similar to theirs. Felix had looked, reluctantly. Now he lifted the ancient clipping and examined it carefully.

Beneath him, wheels began to move.
Chapter 4

Yasir jumped, nimble as a cat, from the ledge where the cave was hidden to the rocky plateau that jutted below. The landing sent a shock through his body and his legs bent to absorb it. Waves thrashed against rock only metres from where he stood — if he walked to the edge of the sandstone plateau he could peer over into the roiling water. He glanced back to check that his possessions, stashed in the tiny cave above, were well hidden: they were. As he turned, his face caught a fine salt spray from the sea below and he closed his eyes to savour it. Bondi Beach was a fine and beautiful place.

There you have it, he thought. I can still appreciate things. All is not lost.

All is not lost. It sounded like the lyric to a terrible pop song. He shook his head. For goodness’ sake!

He picked his way across the rock in the direction of the water. His feet were bare and he walked carefully, frowning. I mustn’t get an infected cut, he thought. A small thing like that could spoil everything.

He stopped at the cliff edge and took a deep breath. He looked forward to the approaching storm — it was unmistakable, that ozone tang in the air. Below him, a few feet away, the water churned and threw itself against the black rocks. Fine spray lifted and drenched his trousers. Above, clouds gathered at the horizon.

He was careful about getting too close to the edge this time. He knew about the power of edges: they sucked at you, pulled you down. He had witnessed the mighty power of the deep ocean, too, from the oily deck of a boat scarcely fit to be split for firewood. A boat with an engine so badly maintained
that it lost power again and again. Hours spent drifting — he stopped himself. It was best not to think of it.

He took a prudent step backwards and resumed scanning the horizon.

When he had arrived at dawn that morning, the bay seemed a miracle after the long walk along Oxford Street then Bondi Road, from the Matthew Talbot Hostel in Woolloomooloo, in the heart of Sydney. The sun appeared as he reached the cliffs, revealing the cave. The dawn blazed and the ocean wind cleared his head. He threw himself down at the very edge of the cliff, exhausted. Time passed easily as he watched the waves roll in a southwest line onto the pale sand in the distance. Relieved, he dangled his legs from the rock ledge and squinted up at the sky.

The vertigo came on suddenly. He peered down. Below the water was dark and deep, too deep to see the bottom, and his head began to spin. He wanted to fall, and suddenly he felt sure that it was gravity’s intention that he should fall. The swirling atoms inside and outside of him wanted him to do it. Thoughts rushed at him from a hidden and hitherto silent part of his mind: it would feel good to give in, to throw away all this heaviness for a moment of lightness — to plunge in. He recovered himself just in time and shunted himself away from the edge until he was far back, in the shade of the overhanging ledge. When at last he felt steadier, he let his hands fall into his lap and looked out again at the unknown sea the colour of ink and the sky, pale and flat as a freshly baked nan-e-Afghani.

His thudding heart reminded him: I am alive. It would be a pitiful shame, a crime, to give my life away.
All is not lost, he reminded himself now, staring at the same patch of sea that had caused him such distress this morning. Body intact. Sense of humour intact. Mind: well, a work in progress. He walked carefully back across the rock ledge towards the concrete path above. He could hear the voices of people walking past; he was reminded that he would have to keep his head down if he planned to stay.

He stroked his palms down the front of his old shirt as he walked. He noticed that as he moved, the filthy fabric moved stiffly around him. I must look like a guilty man, he thought; like someone afraid to leave a footprint. The morning sun lit the side of his face and he saw his shadow moving beside him over the rocks. I exist as the shadow exists, he thought. Flatly, in one dimension. The thought was neat and beautiful.

The poets agreed about beauty, he mused as he ducked under the white painted wooden safety railing and climbed up onto the concrete public path. Oh, yes. Rumi, that old soak. He might have said it himself: the purpose of beauty is to terrify us and render us stupid, then to leave us with a new vision of ourselves.

He smiled and paused, his hands resting on the railing. While other things, basic things — which day it was, the current Australian immigration minister — acquired a certain fuzziness, he could remember his poets, Ferdowsi, Hafiz, Rumi, as if they had spoken their verses to him themselves. Over wine, a candle burning in a pickle jar.

When he first arrived at the hostel, he watched the other wretched men and women and thought them to be poor, impoverished souls. Then one day, a short time later, he caught himself reflected in a shop window and, gawking from
the shock of it, saw that he looked the same. The workers at the hostel called him the Doctor and this made him smile.

Yasir, he’d corrected them. His silence was his protection: it cost him dearly to say even the smallest thing.

Yes sir, they’d replied, laughing. That Doc, what a character.

It was simpler to say nothing.

He set off again, now leaving the concrete path and turning right, onto the dirt track that wound up to the flats above. He stopped abruptly. The feeling of sand beneath his feet jolted him back to boyhood and caused him to stop still for a moment, wondering. Boyhood — but when? He closed his eyes and curled his toes into the sand, waiting for the memory to return but nothing came. He sighed and lumbered on, up the steep goat track.

He pulled himself up through the overgrown shrubbery. His hands grasped at the thick trunks of the bushes and his feet sought toeholds among their roots. He recognised the plants from gardens of his past. The camellias and oleanders reminded him of a certain garden bed near the Museum of Classical Archaeology in the Classics Faculty at Cambridge University — it might have been beside this garden bed that he had first kissed Farah, his beloved wife. And here was such a garden, gone to jungle but with those same old-lady plants, perched on the edge of the sea.

He emerged, cautiously, from the thick undergrowth at the edge of a strip of lawn and squatted in the shelter of a privet, where he was still quite out of sight. Sweat trickled down his brow. He looked across at the building, waiting for his breath to return. He felt his sprits lift. Would the pale girl come outside again? He scratched his head and waited.
Before him, facing out over the ocean, the old block of flats reared out of the steep and rambling garden: a flaking white rectangle, a neglected palace, flanked by a narrow strip of struggling lawn.

This morning, when at last he’d got to his feet, the sun was well on its way and his hipbones were sore from the cold shelf of rock but his mind was made up. He wouldn’t go back to the hostel. This was the place. He could attend to the business of rebuilding himself here, away from the pitiable sadness of the other hostel tenants.

He smiled to himself now, recalling the satisfaction of that moment. It was something, to make a decision.

He had turned to face the cave, noticing instead the old building that loomed above the cliff path, behind the rough garden. Then, the pale girl surprised him by stepping out of the shadow of the building and into the sunlit garden. The early morning sun caught her hair as she stood in the cliff top garden, looking out, holding a black and white cat. She was dazzling.

Looking up at her, he felt something stirring in his mind: not a memory but something like it. She was odd looking, beautiful and not beautiful at the same time. So pale, like a bloodless simulacrum of a person. She didn’t notice him watching, of course: her gaze was fixed on a point somewhere further out, at the horizon, perhaps.

She had turned her back on him, unaware. He felt a strange excitement.

Now Yasir swatted at a mosquito and caught an unpleasant whiff of himself — God save us, I ought to wash soon, he thought. The strange routine he’d developed over the last few months had meant certain things for his body. No showering, for instance, unless he went to the hostel. He had tried to maintain
his body but he couldn’t visit a public toilet without causing mothers to clutch at their children and turn their heads away. It upset him to look the way he did but it was hard to be fastidious.

The garden bed was damp and cool but his knees were growing stiff in the crouching position. He would need to move soon.

He did not, according to his best guess, have a mental illness of any sort. Nevertheless, he thought, a sane person doesn’t walk the city from dusk until dawn then decide to live in a cave. It was fair to say he might have been mad as a mongoose for a bit, he conceded. But he didn’t see God. Not in that way.

He crawled out from under the low branches of the tree, walked up the path towards the flats on silent feet, then stopped next to the building in a pool of sunlight and put his hand against the flaking paint of the warm wall. A hundred years old, he thought. Young. Even the oldest things in this country are young. The only ancient thing is the sky. And, of course, the cave.

He moved his hands along the wall, quietly. Edging along, he came to barometer on a rusty nail by the door. He could almost taste the change in the air, feel it on his dirty skin. There was nothing overhead, not yet. But the truth was on the barometer for anyone to read: Stormy. He closed his eyes and enjoyed the warmth on his back. Stormy: he tried to translate it into the dialect of his boyhood but his memory failed him. He had been robbed of so much by these months of ceaseless worry and walking. Without his original language, he was truly stateless.

He tapped the glass of the old barometer to test it, then, seeing no change on the display, he turned and walked quickly down the path, to the goat track tumbling to the rock pools below.
He climbed down, half tumbling. A foothold gave way and he scrambled down the soft sandy path, grabbing at the shrubbery and scratching his hands. As his heels skidded, he caught a glimpse of the sky between the spreading branches of the camellia and the end of a poem arrived in his head:

Days full of wanting, let them go by
Without worrying that they do.
Stay where you are, inside
Such a pure, hollow note.¹

He landed, brushed the dirt from his hands and emerged onto the concrete path. He ducked under the wooden fence and jumped down to the ledge below — his ledge, his new home — licking his dry lips.

He crept back over the rocks and into the shade. Moments later, realising his expedition had left him hungry, he unfolded a scrunched pile of fatty, translucent paper and ate a handful of cold chips.

Chapter 5

Lena awoke in her Bondi flat just before her alarm went off, with her light blonde hair tangled around her. She turned over and sat up. Magpie, her black and white cat, was mewing and dragging her claws through the long pile of the cream woolen rug beside the bed. Lena pulled the cat onto her lap. That rug was special — a treasured side-of-the-road discovery. You don’t find two perfect 1970s Flokati rugs put out for council hard rubbish collection in one lifetime, she thought.

She rolled over and stood with cat in her arms then crossed the flat in four quick strides, glancing through the glass French doors that faced due east over the sea and led directly to the garden. It was too early, she thought, to let in the full force of the sea breeze so instead she opened the smaller side door that led onto the concrete path along the south flank of the block. It was early. From the doorway she could see that the wind was blustering across the back garden. She glanced up at the clouds above the ocean. A big storm was coming by the look of it — today, of all days. She left the cat on the path and went back inside.

She knew she could expect bad dreams if she went back to sleep but she couldn’t resist: she climbed back into her bed, pulled her pink synthetic velveteen blanket up to her chin and drifted back towards sleep. Sometime later, she turned drowsily and felt a shadow pass the window: probably her next-door neighbor Ken, she thought, on his way to pick the beans from the communal vegetable garden. What was left of them, after the possums had taken their share.

The dreams were as bad as any she’d had. She ran, swift as a hare, through a landscape. She made good her escape — over the wall, through the gully. But her pursuer was relentless. Her mother appeared and they ran side by
side. Cristina grabbed her by the arm and dragged her into the foyer of a grey-hued building. Slow down, Lena shouted, the dream swallowing the words but not the tight ache in her throat. Slow down!

Lena’s scream stopped in her throat as she sat upright up in her bed. Sweat covered one side of her face and her heart pounded. She threw the covers away from her legs and looked down at them. He’d got her in the end, the running man — had grabbed her around the waist and thrown her to the ground.

She scrambled to the end of the bed and craned sideways to see out of the French doors to the sky above the ocean. The bank of thunderheads was almost overhead. She ran a hand over her hair. It crackled with static.

I hope Cristina’s dodgy borrowed van is watertight, she thought, chewing a fingernail. What a day to move house.

She got to her feet slowly, went to the sink of the tiny kitchenette, filled a glass of water, drank half and poured the rest onto the tired pot of parsley on the windowsill. She rested her hips against the old steel sink and flicked at the peeling laminate of the countertop with her fingernail. During the two years she’d rented the flat, she had replaced every hinge on her kitchen cupboards in an effort to stop the landlord replacing the pre-war wooden round-edged units with flat plastic rectangular ones. She sanded and painted the doors in vintage turquoise and bought a tin breadbin to match. She’d paid for her stand against repairs, however: the old taps leaked, the floorboards warped beneath the old Westinghouse fridge and cockroach armies made nightly assaults through the gaps in the skirting boards.
Lena filled the kettle and remembered that her mother was moving into a new flat, finally. Her mobile chimed from the corner of the benchtop. She reached for it and opened the message from Cristina: Still an hour away, sorry!

She threw the phone on the bed. I should know better, she thought bitterly. Cristina’s life was so important, so complicated, that she couldn’t get by on the time she had. She needed Lena’s too. Lots of it.

Lena grabbed her wash bag and towel and strode out along the back path to the bathroom.

Lena spent long minutes in the shower, in violation of Ken’s strict rules about water usage. She washed her hair, even helping herself to some of her neighbour’s precious organic cherry and walnut shampoo. Buoyed up by her small acts of treason, she emerged feeling renewed and walked back to her flat whistling, with the towel tucked around her and her long hair flattened against her back.

She put on her old pink and orange kimono with the butterfly design and admired it quickly in the mirror before throwing her towel over one shoulder, opening the French doors and stepping out to the back lawn. She bent forward at the waist and twisted her hair into a towel turban, which she coiled on top of her head.

She went back into the flat and made coffee. Then, cup in hand, she retraced her steps to the lawn. She bent again, unwound the towel and then, standing, threw her head back; the damp tips of her hair flung drips in an arc onto the grass. She realised with irritation that this gesture belonged to her mother. It was something she had seen her Cristina do since she was a child: the rather
ostentatious bend, unwind, flick. It always made her uneasy when she recognised any resemblance between herself and Cristina.

She wiped the drips that trickled down her forehead. Every day, since she could remember, she had checked herself against any repetition of her mother’s habits.

She reached through the French doors and lifted an art catalogue and her tartan travel rug from the corner of the sofa. Fanning her wet hair around her shoulders, she folded herself neatly, legs tucked, onto the rug. The wind licked her damp hair into knots and she frowned. Beyond the breakers, she could see the frothy white crests of waves. She pulled the catalogue onto her lap, *Valerie Dawson: Paintings* by Daniel Faber, and it fell open at one of her favourite pictures.

It was of Valerie Dawson, taken while the artist was sitting on the wall in front of a sandstone house in Kirribilli, shading her eyes. Valerie wore high waisted trousers and a lit cigarette dangled from her fingers. The pavement in front of her was littered with leaves. Her mouth was half-open, forming a word.

Lena peered at the picture. She’d been to that house and had knocked on the door at seven one evening. A young and smart-looking couple appeared and listened to her dubiously. We own the place now, they told her in apologetic tones. They were sweet and rather stand-offish. They hadn’t heard of Valerie Dawson, which seemed impossible to Lena, who had spent years studying the painter.

Some people don’t pay any attention to art, she told them lightly as they waved her off. She was trying to be fair. They told her they were accountants. You see? I pay no attention to financial planning, she told them. At your own
peril, the young man told her bleakly. Should we get a brass plaque, he asked? Lena said no, she didn’t think so.

She smiled down at the book. In two more days, she thought happily, I’ll actually start to be paid to be an egghead about an obscure painter. On Monday she would start working with Daniel Faber at his gallery.

The picture of Valerie was good, she thought, catching the strands of hair that blew across her face. It captured a moment of apprehension, when things were not settled, when a question hung between the subject and the photographer. There was a glimmer of her famous wildness in that look she gave, her mouth shaped to form a bitter retort or a caustic insult. Valerie was famous for those. I took it before Valerie was famous, Daniel Faber told her; before, as he put it, her wiring went bad.

Lena closed her eyes. The garden was chilly. But she was settled now. She would bear it a little longer. She could remember the interview when Daniel used that phrase. She remembered him saying other things that were sweet and odd; he was quaint and flirtatious, and their conversations always felt slightly dangerous. She wondered what his smiles concealed, tried to guess at a hidden agenda.

He told her that Valerie preferred it when the sun was high and bright — she never painted in the dazzling light of midsummer. Spring suited her, she did most of her paintings in springtime. Today, for instance, with its dull sky and crisp wintery chill would have been an indoors day for Valerie. A books and cigarettes day. No painting on a day like today; only arguments with Daniel and planning and gossip. So he said.
Lena opened her eyes and returned her attention to the catalogue in her lap. She turned the page. Valerie Dawson famously said her favourite colour was yellow, because it was so vulgar and so impossible to use in a serious painting. But when Lena thought of Valerie Dawson she imagined blue-greys and shades of white: dirty white, like photocopy paper with a layer of fine dust; or white with a slight blush deepening into mauve; or white that seemed glacial until you saw it next to a true white and discovered the original was buttery cream.

Lena frowned. If Cristina were to arrive now, she’d say the same *hilarious* thing she always said: haven’t you finished reading that yet?

Lena closed the catalogue, picked up her coffee cup and stood, shaking her damp hair back from her shoulders and brushing off her skirt. She turned away from the ocean and went back inside her tiny flat to prepare for her mother’s arrival.

By nine, Lena, Cristina and Artie, Cristina’s boyfriend, were crammed into the cab of a borrowed Daihatsu van, labouring up Bondi Road towards the city. The road was gridlocked both ways as traffic hauled its Saturday morning cargo uphill towards town and downhill to the crashing surf. The wind had dropped but the sky was grey. Lena, behind the wheel, imagined the clouds were an accumulation of all the spent emotions around her, purplish and toxic. She sensed her mother’s reproach coming before her voice carried above the engine.

‘God, Lena. You’re miserable today!’

‘Mama, I’m happy for you, stupid. Let me go, I’m driving.’

Cristina twisted in her seat to shout to Artie, in the back. ‘Look Artie, such a sourpuss!’
'Mama, stop!' God help me, Lena thought to herself. Would Cristina keep this up all the way to Newtown?

They chugged up Bondi Road, the van spewing out diesel fumes and grinding through second gear, the old bobble-top gearstick leaning out of the gearbox like a hard weed. Cristina nursed a cyclamen in a pink pot and a thin dressing table mirror in a gold painted frame on her lap. Lena glanced at them nervously as they bounced on Cristina’s skinny legs. Every bump was amplified by the van’s suspension.

‘Where did you get this thing?’ Lena tugged at the gearstick.

‘From our group leader Tony,’ said Cristina happily.

Lena frowned and peered over the wheel. Tony, from AA. Tony, the big Boy Scout who fixed everyone’s problems with a bowline knot and a twelve-step pamphlet.

She sighed. Cristina and Artie were shacking up like a pair of dippy students, nothing between them but some Salvo’s furniture and a set of cheap sheets. On the plus side, she’s finally moving off my couch, Lena thought, that’s something at least. Perhaps Cristina was right — perhaps she should try to summon some enthusiasm.

Cristina always finds the energy to start over, Lena thought, when the blackness passes. It’s the rest of us who find it hard.

The gearstick jammed, losing its bite. The drivers behind were quick on their horns. Cristina’s head was out the window in an instant, her home-cut hair falling over her face.

‘Fuck you, bastards!’
Lena pulled Cristina into the van by the back of her jacket and heard a snapping sound.

‘Oh no, it’s ruined, look. Lena how could you?’

Lena looked across at the mirror in her mother’s lap. A long crack slashed the face of it.

Artie leaned in from the back, his voice creased with anxiety.

‘Hey, hey. Never mind Crissie, eh?’

But it was too late, Cristina’s tears splashed the leaves of the houseplant in her lap and her cries filled the van. Lena felt a customary blankness settle over her face, the expression Cristina claimed to hate so much.

Lena turned west and started the trek through the city. High above her in the van, above the exhaust fumes and the winding east-west traffic, above the compressed lives and expectations, the rehearsed apologies and feelings of disappointment, the sky blackened at their heels and heavy clouds accumulated. And she could *feel* it.

Cristina sobbed as if her heart was broken and would never be mended. Artie squeezed her shoulder. Lena looked over at her mother and knew Cristina was crying for something else besides the broken mirror and the accursed bad luck: she was crying for the hopelessness of it all, and for the shame she felt. Lena knew the cycle of her mother’s despair — how a small sorrow opened a trapdoor to the bitterness and failure beneath.

Lena sat back in the old vinyl seat. Likely as not, Cristina won’t even remember this, she thought.

Lena remembered everything. Her hands tightened on the wheel as she considered the unfairness of this. Every house; every fight; every bloke who tried
to fix things. She caught a glimpse of Artie in the rear view mirror. He looked worried. You should be, she thought. Poor bastard. In a moment of spite, she thought: I should warn him. I ought to list all my mother’s boyfriends for him, including the ones who would have been a father to me, if Cristina hadn’t fallen off the wagon. Including the ones whose slapping hands I learned to avoid. And — why not? — including the one who messed things up so badly that my name was written into files and talked about in the offices of the Department of Community Services. Her name was never quite her own after that. They follow you, those files.

But she couldn’t do that to Artie. It wasn’t his fault.

Lena remembered the men in Cristina’s life because they were the roadmap to her shadowy, peripatetic childhood. Those men took them all over the suburbs and up the coast. Into caravan parks and rented flats and houses with holes punched in the walls. Good houses too, but not for long. They were always just passing through.

Big soft Artie, come to take Cristina off her hands. He hardly looks up to it, she thought, but let’s hope he is.

She closed her mind to the sounds of the van — Cristina’s wretched sniffling, Artie’s whispered assurances and the incessant drone of the engine — and turned her mind to her mother’s new situation.

One afternoon, two months before, Cristina had told her that this time it was love. Cristina met Artie at Alcoholics Anonymous. Standing in Lena’s kitchen drinking tea in their bathers, salty water pooling on the old lino, Cristina told Lena he was handsome, using the Swedish word, but more than that he had kindness in his face. It made her want to sit next to him, stroke his hand, take that
grey chin in her hands and look at him slowly. I’m an old bird these days, she
had said. I want kindness.

That day, in response to her mother’s disclosure, Lena nodded, blew the
steam from her cup of tea into curls and tried to understand but couldn’t. Why
choose another broken man? Why not go and find a man who had a job, who had
interests, who could drive a car for heaven’s sake?

She hid her doubts and told her mum she was happy, really happy for her.

‘Go for it,’ she said. ‘You’re not getting any younger.’

Cristina giggled like a girl and pulled up a strand of her yellow hair. ‘But
not a single grey, not even after everything.’

‘Mama, you look great and you know it.’ She watched her mother cross
the room and retrieve her clothes from the pile in the corner and stoop to tug her
jeans over her bathers.

‘Still a size 10,’ laughed Cristina.

After everything. Lena rinsed the spoons in the sink and watched her
mother dress. Tiny body, no bum in the op shop jeans pulled up unfashionably
high. Sunspots on the back of the thin arms, the northern skin drawn leathery and
taut. Hair cut as if it had been done with a knife and fork but still that same pale
white-gold of the girlhood photos. The same as Lena’s.

Cristina caught Lena’s eye. At times like this, she often mistook Lena’s
silence for brooding. ‘Maybe you’ll get a boyfriend at your new job. Find a nice
man?’

The van backfired, bringing Lena’s thoughts abruptly back to the present.
She groaned inwardly to think of Cristina’s neediness, her longing for love, as
she watched Artie lean forward from the back to stroke Cristina’s hair. She caught the words he repeated to Cristina.

‘We’ll get a new mirror. I saw one just like it at Spotlight. We’ll just get a new one.’

Last week, when they had been preparing for the move to Newtown, Artie came around to Lena’s and showed her photos of his kids, Annie and Jake, nearly ready for high school and great students both. Her heart full of pity, Lena drove Cristina and Artie out to the Salvo’s out on the Princes Highway — Tempe Tip they called it — and they chose a few sticks of furniture, laughing at the ugly lounge suites but selecting one anyway and a chenille rug to throw over the top. It doesn’t matter, Cristina insisted. It’s an adventure. But to Lena the big warehouse seemed congested with dead smells. Cast-offs never quite lose that stink of a previous life, she thought.

Under the neon lights of the secondhand warehouse, Artie’s shoulders crowded forward under his fleece, his big body sagging with the effort of all that hope.

‘You’ll come over for dinner, won’t you? I’ll ask Annie and Jake,’ he said.

Lena smiled at them both insincerely. ‘Of course I’ll come. I’ll miss my mother’s cooking.’

They laughed, thankful for the opportunity. They all knew that Cristina could hardly boil an egg. Cristina hugged Artie happily and Lena wished she could take a photo to show them later if things went bad.

‘Anyhow, it’s not everyday you can sit on a couch that horrible.’

‘She’s an artist, Artie. She only likes to look at beautiful things.’
‘Not an artist, not any more mama.’

‘One day, eh?’

I’m a bad person, she thought now, turning off Broadway towards Newtown. I’m a terrible person to have such black thoughts. Let them be happy. Why not?

But the nagging doubt remained. Because she and Cristina had been here before, hadn’t they? Lena wondered how it was that her mother’s faith never wore out when she felt so utterly tired.

When they arrived at Hordern Street, in Newtown, Cristina was back on the up. She jumped from the cab to guide the clumsy van between the parked cars and into the alleyway beside their charmless rental house — a single-storey Victorian terrace, with a dropping front gutter and peeling salmon paint.

Artie unloaded energetically, carting the boxes of Cristina’s books and blackened pots and candle stubs. Cristina lit a cigarette in the doorway and Lena, plugging in the television and DVD player in the tiny front room, sniffed at the backdraft.

‘I thought you were quitting.’

‘Oh come on. One thing at a time, eh?’

‘OK.’

‘Artie’s starving. We’re off to get something. You want to come?’

Lena shook her head and watched them up go up the street, holding hands like schoolkids. She stood and straightened her stiff knees. Her mother could be happy here. Artie might keep her on the straight and narrow.
She walked into the kitchen and switched on the kettle. The kitchen was old but functional — they could do worse, she thought, leaning against the bench. She found a cup and a tea bag in the crates on the floor. Then she saw the six-pack of bourbon and coke cans, half-hidden under a pile of tea towels and a bag of onions.

Liar, she thought.

She decided not to wait for the argument. She left the cans uncovered and pulled the door shut behind her. She walked quickly up the lane and out onto the main road. Let them figure out how to get the van back, she thought, anger reddening her cheeks.

As she walked, the first raindrops fell.
Chapter 6

The temperature in the aeroplane cabin climbed. Felix’s shirt stuck to his back. He listened to the hum of the engine and wondered if they were flying into real trouble. The pilot calmly announced the storm: fasten seat belts, turbulence expected, attempting to land as planned.

Lightning cracked off the wing tip and the great cloudbank below was illuminated for a moment in gold and pink. If Kate were here, he thought, she’d say it made poetic sense for him to pass through a tempest before making his arrival in Sydney; it was very Shakespearean, very apt. After so many years of hearing her say that life was just like the theatre, he was starting to believe it was true.

The cabin rocked and the gunfire sound of a second lightning strike caused a collective intake of breath. The seatbelt tethered him to his chair as the cabin dipped and rocked. He closed his eyes and waited for the denouement. A first landing attempt was aborted; the aircraft was diverted to the dark Pacific, over the beaches to the north of the city and out to sea. They travelled back in a wide loop. Back to Botany Bay, said the captain cheerfully. Felix chanced a quick glance out of the window, to see the famous harbour, but the view outside the cabin was black. The storm bucked and rolled around them. The landing was rough and the pilot received a cheer for heroism, although not from Felix, whose jaw was rigid.

He let out his breath and eased the strain in his chest. They taxied slowly to the airport bay and he looked around as relieved passengers chatted with their neighbours. He allowed a moment for his head to clear. Then he got to his feet with the rest of them and staggered to the doors.
When he wheeled his luggage out of customs, it was with an enormous sense of relief. He was looking forward to the drenching rain on his skin, and to the air’s pleasant charge and smell. He pushed his luggage trolley eagerly through the waiting crowd.

In the taxi, however, pictures of his father — horrible ones, the images of a dying man — danced, unbidden, before his eyes. He thought about the remnants of family left behind, in particular his uncles, Peter and Aubrey. Jozef’s adoptive brothers were both so old now they seemed to deteriorate between one visit and the next.

They dealt with Jozef’s death very badly. Our little brother, Peter said at the funeral, his voice faint. So small when he came.

Jozef’s arrival had been described so many times — the whey-faced orphan, the haunted eyes, the battered suitcase, his heroic and unlikely survival — that Felix saw it clearly in his mind. He imagined that as death approached, his father’s eyes regained that bewildered, startled look. It was an illusion, Felix realised. But it disturbed him nevertheless.

He let his head fall against the vinyl seat of the taxi. Jozef’s decline prompted the use of certain conventional couplets: suffering and peace, pain and release. At the end, Felix saw that there would be no true relief for his father; only relief for himself and the uncles. Death in itself could only be considered a liberation if one maintained an optimistic outlook on the afterlife, and he didn’t. He thought bitterly: Jozef wasn’t spared, he suffered right until the last moment. He deserved better. Unexpected tears collected in the corners of Felix’s eyes.

He’d learned a number of uncomfortable things about his father in those last days. At Jozef’s funeral, Felix looked around at the assembled crowd and
thought, with a pang, that it seemed piteously small. Jozef had made connections in his life. He had acquaintances from among his professional community at Kings College. But where were the friends?

In keeping with Jozef’s plan, he’d used the local Dulwich funeral parlour, Sullivan and Sons up on Lordship Lane. Jozef had pleaded for brevity and restraint. The small hall on the Sullivans premises would be quite suitable for the service, he said. As the hall slowly filled, Felix waited in the chair by the door. The music began: Arvo Pärt, Jozef’s favourite, which had seemed the perfect choice until that moment when it soared, melancholic and thinly morose. A ghastly choice, he thought suddenly.

Kate slipped into the chair beside him and took his hand. It made him feel older, as if she recognized that Jozef’s death conferred on him a new status. As if their troubles were small things that could be put aside. She didn’t cry but he recognised the tightness in her cheeks, the band of white around her lips. His heart swelled with gratitude.

Peter Chisholm struggled past then, with his daughter Bernice on one side, her husband Gareth on the other. The old man wore a navy blazer over his big bony frame and grey trousers that had been hemmed, incompetently, an inch too short. Felix unfolded his hand from Kate’s, left his chair and slid into the cold wooden pew next to his cousin.

Bernice’s lips brushed his cheek and Peter drew a dusty bottle of wine from Bernice’s bag and handed it to him. Pink spots burned high in the old man’s cheeks.

‘We’ll have it later.’
Felix took the bottle and thanked him. It was an old one, expensive. He reached out to clasp the mottled hand and Peter’s eyes filled with tears.

‘Poor old Jozef,’ Peter said.

Felix nodded back.

Pärt’s sombre Fratres had filled the hall — awful, mournful music. Jozef would have cringed.

Next, Aubrey Chisholm squeezed onto the pew out of breath. His suit was cut for a thinner man and it emphasised his girth.

‘May I say a few words today?’ he wheezed. ‘I’ve written a eulogy good enough to get him through the pearly gates.’

Felix attempted a smile. Jozef’s views on God were well known.

‘In case he’s changed his mind?’

‘Exactly. It’s a bet both ways,’ said Aubrey.

Then the music faded: it was time for things to begin. Felix made his way carefully to the small lectern. He felt drugged, was thrown off course by the leaden sensation in his arms. He opened his mouth to speak and his tongue jammed hard against his palate. The colour raced up his neck. He hadn’t stuttered since he was a teenager. His eyes raked the crowd for Kate and Salil. His old friend was almost on his feet to help when the first word finally freed itself from the arresting grip in his throat.

Outside, beyond his own voice, Felix heard the faint din of birds. Somehow, he finished. Then he stood in silence, eyes drawn to the window, where seagulls screeched and fought and wheeled away over the Thames. Then the music began and he was led to his seat, music tearing his breath from his ribcage.
During the wake at the Crown and Stallion in Dulwich Village, Felix sought out the old Chisholm brothers and found them drawn into a pensive huddle over by the dartboard.

‘What will you do now?’ Peter’s eyes scanned his face. ‘About Jozef’s trip to Sydney? You could still go.’

He felt a tide of emotions rise in him: an inflammable combination of old anger, and disappointment. Somebody placed a pint in his hand. He gulped from it, then pushed past them and walked unsteadily out into the corridor. He found the back door, tugged it open and stumbled out into the carpark.

In the gloomy carpark he spotted his cousin Bernice smoking furtively by the chain link fence, the straps of her flimsy dress falling down over her arms.

She looked up at him. ‘Alright?’

He accepted a cigarette from the offered pack.

‘You said you quit,’ he said.

Bernice shrugged. There were fat beads of sweat on her nose.

‘Gareth’s got no sense of smell. Doesn’t notice a thing. And the kids smoke like chimneys anyhow. They think I don’t know.’

Felix let the afternoon sun warm his face. He felt a little of his anxiety ebb away. He drew deeply on the cigarette and the hot smoke made him cough.

‘Jozef and this bloody Sydney trip.’

Bernice let out a jet of smoke from both nostrils, looked at him sharply.

‘You have to go. It’s the end of Jozef’s story.’

She threw her cigarette butt onto the gravel and pulled up the straps of her dress.
Now he sighed and opened his eyes to see the unfamiliar streets of Sydney pass the taxi window, cloaked in rain. He needed to eat and to sleep; to wash his face and change his clothes. The taxi pulled up outside a sandstone hotel and he peered up through the downpour to the blank windows.

Jozef had arrived in London in a rainstorm, Felix thought idly, as the taxi driver wrote a receipt. Jozef had taken him to see *The Tempest* at The Globe, on London’s Southbank, many years before. Jozef had told him it was his favourite of all Shakespeare’s plays and Felix could see why — Jozef saw himself in Ferdinand, an innocent washed ashore by a storm that convulsed the world.

Now here I am, thought Felix, carried by a different storm to a very different shore.
Chapter 7

Yasir pressed the curve of his back against the smooth rock. As the moments passed, he felt the transfer of coldness, stone to flesh, despite his heavy coat and despite the blanket and the layers of newspaper he’d carefully placed to make his bed. Outside, centimetres in front of him, the rain fell in sheets onto the rock ledge and washed down into the crashing sea.

He huddled deeper into his cave. It was a secret place, hollowed out by wind and water. Above him was the signature, left long ago, of another person. It was a carving of a snake, the sinewy curves of its thin body following the line of the rock.

He took a breath and lifted his fingers to the carving. He saw that the outline groove of the snake’s body had been traced many times, until it was deep and smooth. The snake’s head was a careful ellipse. In his mind, it was the work of a man as dishevelled and hairy as himself, perhaps just as frightened. Shifting his shoulders against the rock, he saw that this man would have had to lay in the very position he was in to score the stone. Head tilted, hands in front of his face.

He ran his fingertips rhythmically over the deep grooves. He sent this man his good wishes. He wished him luck on his hunt. He hoped the man would be reunited with his family and that they would eat well tonight.

He let his hands fall onto his chest and turned his face to the rain — to the ocean, somewhere there in the black before him — and began the slow wait for dawn. He’d spent the night lulled and drowsy in the heaven-and-earth state between sleep and wakefulness, thinking how little a body needs to survive. Shelter, like this. Food, yes. Hunger was a constant.
He heard voices, suddenly — men shouting above the rain — and he pressed himself to the back of the rock. He saw two men in heavy clothes pick their way across the rock plateau between his cave and the sea, carrying rods and buckets. Their shouts carried over the wind and then they turned towards him, backs towards the sea, to bait their rods. Yasir saw their dark outlines, saw the way they hurried in the dark and cold. They swore at each other and stubbed their fingers. But there was a sense of excitement in their voices; Yasir noticed it in their bumbling urgency and in the way they swept rain out of their eyes. They cast in giant arcs, the supple rods swaying. The men fell still and seemed to him to sway too. He imagined the men were brothers, as close as brothers could be. Before long, the yellow dawn began to illuminate their silent silhouettes.

He watched, his tired body growing colder, his empty stomach filling with acid. Sea birds arrived and swooped over the mens’ lines. The brothers were lucky. They hauled in wriggling silver fish, one after the other.

If the rain were to clear now, the place would reveal him, he thought. Then he reminded himself these men probably wouldn’t notice him; people often didn’t.

He closed his eyes. He traced the snake with the tip of his finger. He remembered his idea, his ballast, connecting him to the world. It was simply to recover. To rebuild himself and to be whole again. He yawned and turned onto his side. This way, if the skies should clear and the men were more observant than average, then at least the men would not see his face.
He saw the knife as soon as he awoke. It had a real bone handle, a sharp and curving blade. He eased himself out of the cave and clambered down across the slick rock platform to where the knife lay glinting, then plucked it from its niche in the rock. He rested the weight of it in his palm, let it roll over. Just a nick from the fish-gored blade could mean infection, he thought, I ought to be more careful. He hesitated. Perhaps he should leave it here on the rock. Would the men come back for it?

He stood up, stretched his back and looked down at the marvellous thing in his palm. Suddenly, he knew it was a gift from the snake. For him.

He carried the beautiful knife back to the sandstone ledge in front of the cave. An idea formed quickly in his mind; he grabbed a handful of the foul hanks of hair that fell in front of his eyes and started hacking away. The knife was very sharp. Pieces of hair fell into his lap, disgusting matted things. He cut close to his scalp, but was careful to leave some hair — he didn’t wish to look thuggish. As the pile of hacked hair grew, so did his excitement. When he had finished he reached into the back of the little cave and placed the knife there carefully, in the darkest part. It would be no good at all for a child to find a knife such as this one, with its evil edge. He gathered the foul hair in a pile then pushed it into a crevice.

He clambered back up the tumbled rock wall to the path above the cave and walked along it for a short distance until he met the road. He stopped at a black car, a new Japanese model, and crouched next to it. With his sleeve, he wiped the raindrops from the wing mirror then jammed his face up against the passenger door to examine his reflection. His face, both familiar and frightening, stared back at him — the long nose, the eyelashes too long and pretty for a man. But he also saw the dirt, the lines etched by weather and worry. He pulled away
and splashed through a puddle, stumbling, knocking the car door with his elbow as he went. A car alarm split the air. He ran.
Chapter 8

The hotel shower jet pounded the back of Felix’s neck and he felt the knots loosen and unwind. Eventually, he turned off the taps, reached for the towel and stepped out onto the tiles. The towel was soft and luxurious. He’d become used to Jozef’s threadbare old relics, reminders of the austerities of his childhood. He dried off and walked through to the bedroom.

The place was decorated in the neutral style that passed for taste in hotels like these: production-line prints on the walls, grey carpet, white linen. Kate would have sneered if she were here. As he turned, he caught his outline in the mirror on the wardrobe door. He was still fit, he liked to run. His legs were thin and strong and he was tall. But he saw that he might soon go grey; that his hair had started to look dull in the sunlight. The clutch of pubic hair looked pitiful against his white thighs. Let me sort my life before I’m old, he thought. He sucked in a lungful of air and watched his chest puff out. He exhaled noisily, thinking: love, family life, holidays in the sun. Before I’m too old.

The image of Jozef dead in his bed came to him and he tried to blink it away.

He perched on the edge of the bed and drew his laptop close. He saw an email from Niamh waiting in his inbox. It was an invitation to her 50th in a bar in Soho, with the comment: ‘No big deal that you won’t be here. Planning to turn 50 again next year.’

He wrote back: ‘A filler for you — Australian breast cancer gene patent dispute. Ugly war between big pharmas stalls research?’ He had seen a report in
the newspaper that day, telling of the conflict preventing continued research by scientists whose work had the potential to save many lives.

He smiled to himself. Niamh was undisputed queen of the office as well as boss of the editorial team. He managed to avoid most of her chummy nights out — which would have been fatal to her good opinion of many of their colleagues. But in Felix’s case, she didn’t seem to hold it against him. On the odd occasion, she managed to talk him into a drink at the local bar. He remembered a night six months ago when they’d both drank too much and the conversation had turned to personal things. She asked him why he hadn’t followed his father into medicine. He took the degree, didn’t he?

He hunched over his beer. It was the kind of question that always made him squirm.

‘I studied medicine because they all expected me too. It was a mistake,’ he said.

He considered this now in his hotel room in Sydney: he knew it wasn’t strictly true. He might have enjoyed medicine, left to his own devices. But it was Jozef’s thing. That made it impossible.

Niamh had shaken her head. ‘You’re in no man’s land, my friend,’ she said.

He looked across at her, half pissed and outraged.

She waved her pint glass at him. ‘This magazine stuff isn’t for you. Go ahead and find something else to do. You’re wasting your time with me.’

He felt the heat rising in his cheeks. ‘What do you mean?’

He’d worked for Niamh for nearly five years. They all knew he was good at it and, unlike half the staff, he wasn’t always moaning about the novel he
could be finishing or the app that lay half done on his computer at home, the one that would change the world.

The truth was, it had taken him a long time to realise that he didn’t want to follow Jozef into medicine. He had finished his medical degree, even done some of the internship at the hospital before he realised being a doctor wasn’t for him. He thought he’d found his natural home writing for the magazine. It hurt to think that Niamh saw it differently.

In the dim light of the bar, she laughed and knocked his shoulder with the back of her hand.

‘Where to next? That’s what I mean. That’s all.’

He stared into his glass, sullenly. Where to, indeed.

Now he closed his laptop and looked out the hotel window at the traffic-clogged street below. He felt tiredness tugging at his thoughts.

He’d taken Jozef to all his appointments at the hospital. Jozef’s colleagues at the university were helpful when it came to recommendations and Jozef’s name jumped to the top of the best oncologist’s list. Felix and Jozef discussed the medical detail: it helped Jozef, he saw, to understand his illness strictly in terms of science. But before too long it became a matter of feelings and hope. Not my father’s specialty, he thought.

Jozef was soon too sick to leave the house, then too sick to leave his bed. The morning of his death, Kate delivered a box of Felix’s old CDs to Jozef’s house. She’d found a buyer at last for their Croydon flat and was emptying the place.

‘A Texan,’ she’d told him over the phone at breakfast. ‘Can you imagine a great big Texan in our flat?’
The flat was dainty and Georgian. Their taste had been minimal, expensive.

‘Jozef’ll probably go today,’ he said when she arrived with the box. They were standing in the front garden on the pebble path. Kate’s eyes watered from exposure to pollens. Her light brown hair caught the sun and he remembered her in her underwear, next to their bed: *Look at me. You won’t even look at me.*

‘You want me to stay? I can if you want.’ Her eyes met his as the box changed hands. He caught the tiny flicker of reproach.

‘No,’ said Felix. ‘There’s the nurse. We’re OK.’ Since their separation, she was excluded from the tight circle he and his father inhabited.

He carried the box of CDs inside and took them to his bedroom upstairs. He put them on the bed. The bedcovers were crisp and undisturbed. For three nights, he’d dozed in the chair next to Jozef’s bed, instead of sleeping in his bed. He’d held his father’s papery hand, whispered to him in the dark and, as the old man’s breath grew ragged, he begged for death to hasten. In that low time, around four in the morning, when more people die than any other, he had counted his father’s breaths.

When his father’s life ended — at the very moment of its end, when Jozef exhaled his final breath and there was only stillness after — Felix was sitting in the chair. As the sun came through Jozef’s window and warmed the back of his chair, Jozef’s body shook with its last faltering gasp and Felix’s perception of the details of his father’s bedroom seemed to sharpen: the stripes of yellow light across Jozef’s chest, the stubble on the old man’s chin, the book at the bedside open at the place where Felix had stopped reading. He glanced at the digital
clock so he would remember the time: 12.32. Then he laid his head on his father’s chest.

Moments later, Felix had heard a soft footfall on the carpet outside the door and Sylvia the nurse came in. She moved around Jozef’s body, sighing, closing the eyes and placing his hands inside the bedcovers. Felix wanted to shout, to tell her how Jozef hated being touched by strangers. He wished, suddenly, that he could have that moment of death over again. This time he would think about the proper issues: the passing of time; the importance of a life; the existence of a soul and its destination. He had cheated his father and let his defences down. He stared at the patterned light on the counterpane.

He went downstairs and stood, shakily, in the front garden. He wasn’t sure what was expected of him. How was he to know? He imagined that he ought to cry but no tears came.

Outside, in the summer sun, insects clamoured and plants burst their boundaries while Felix stood on the path. Upstairs in the front bedroom, a body was growing cold. Felix had felt on the verge of an insight, a certain something equals something, but it was snatched away and all that remained was the paradox of his father, the garden and a whirling sense of nausea, nagging and unpleasant.

Now Felix’s eyes travelled the beige walls of the Darlinghurst hotel room. He tried not to think. It was nearly 10 am and the unknown world below his window had grown busy. The rain slowed and finally stopped but Felix could see that beyond the window the city was still cloaked in grey.
He lay back on the bed, Jozef’s old Rolex Oyster sliding on his wrist. He was unaccustomed to its weight and it slid up to his forearm. Made for a bigger man, he thought, before sleep gathered him away, at last.
Chapter 9

Lena pushed open the heavy glass doors of the Cook and Phillip public swimming pool. Cock and Feel-up, as her best friend Gabriel called it, thanks to its popularity among his circle of Darlinghurst queers.

The chlorine-tainted air filled her lungs, its chemical taste lingering on her tongue. Swimming helped. It helped her sleep, during those times when she felt overwound, when each worry tightened the cog inside her another notch. It reduced her individual problems to small things. She stripped to her bathers, left her clothes in a pile on the bench, walked to the deep end and dived in.

After her swim, she climbed out and lugged her gear into the change room. She took out her phone and played her mother’s voicemail message: *Your jealousy’s turning you black inside, Lena! Because I have Artie and you have no-one.*

She threw it onto her towel on the bench and sat down. Whenever Cristina declared war, her battle cries were predictable: Lena was judgmental; she was callous and unfeeling. She never tried to understand her mother’s pain. She was selfish and mean hearted.

Lena pulled herself upright on the bench. The shake in her legs felt good — she pinched the skin of her thigh, the way she used to as a kid, to remind herself she was in charge, that she was tough and could stand real pain. She knew physical exhaustion would soon help quiet Cristina’s voice in her head. She peeled her racing bathers down over her waxy white stomach and caught a glimpse of herself naked in the mirror opposite.

She stood and noticed with a slight jolt that she had lost more weight. Her pale hair clung to a long neck and bony shoulders. Her ribs and hipbones jutted
beneath her skin. She shifted and there was the scar, a purplish-white crisscross on the round part of her shoulder that travelled down the outside of her left arm in a fat keloid ridge. It was so ugly that people wanted to touch it, to admire it, perversely. She touched it with her fingertip herself — tracing it, gently — and felt the faint jangling of old, exposed nerve endings. Looking furtively around to see that she wasn’t being observed, she lifted her breasts in her hands and pushed them together, making them into a rounded cleavage. Then she let her hands fall to her sides. So much for that, she thought.

She wrapped her towel around her waist and untangled her hair. Then she dressed, packed her gear and stepped out into the wet evening.

She walked through the drizzle, her damp hair clinging but she brushed the rain out of her eyes and walked steadily. She pulled her jacket across her body and crossed her arms across her chest for warmth. The swim had made her tired and left her with a gnawing hunger. She felt too light, too empty.

Sometimes, three or four times a year, when a similar uncomfortable lightness filled her bones like smoke, she went to a city bar and picked up a stranger. She would sing to herself on the bus to work the next day — softly, under her breath — and clench her thighs. Sex provided a counterweight; it was a way of tethering her to earth.

Gabriel didn’t condemn her for her trysts, not the way a female friend might. He understood the risk taking and the pay-off. Gay men used their sexual freedom, they didn’t judge. In Gabriel’s world, you didn’t have to be fucked up to enjoy a night with a stranger. She liked that.

She walked on, looking forward to dinner.
Gabriel answered the door of his Elizabeth Bay flat with his usual flair:

‘You’re late, bi-atch.’

In the white porch light he looked stunning. Lena had always marveled at his symmetry. Sometimes she took his face in her hands and turned it this way and that, looking for flaws. His teeth were perfectly straight, his skin creamy and his black hair shiny. Tonight he wore a loose white t-shirt with a chrysanthemum design, something she didn’t recognise.

He shaded his dark eyes against the dazzling light.

‘Can’t see you. Are you in one piece?’

‘Yes. And this isn’t late, this is Parisian.’

‘As if you’d know. You’ve never been further than Penrith.’ He closed the door behind her.

‘There was Coffs Harbour.’

‘Oh, please.’

‘New shirt?’

‘From The One.’ It was their code: his new boyfriend Tom.

He waited for her to take off her wet coat and scarf. She grabbed him in a damp hug, and sagged momentarily on his shoulder, just for a second. But he was quick to respond.

‘Cristina’s gone then?’

‘Yep. Banished to Newtown.’

He pushed her away to arm’s length so she could not avoid his eyes.

‘Good. Time to get on with your life then.’
The world tilted on its axis for a moment. In all the years they’d been friends, Gabriel had never lectured about Cristina. Lena felt her heart lurch. He looked away, signalling the subject was closed for now.

‘Shoes off, please.’

She pulled off her black ankle boots and dropped them on the floorboards then followed him through the tiny entranceway and into the art deco lounge room.

‘Hi!’ A dark head appeared around the corner, winked then disappeared: it was Tom, sporting the beginnings of a thin moustache. Lena heard a third voice in the kitchen and pulled at the back of Gabriel’s shirt.

‘You’re not trying to set me up again are you?’ she hissed.

Gabriel smirked and lowered his voice. ‘Not tonight Josephine. He’s a present.’

‘A what?’

‘A present. From Tom to me. It’s our six-month anniversary.’

Gabriel led her to the couch. She folded herself onto it, tucking her shins beneath her. While Gabriel disappeared into the kitchen she helped herself to the pistachios on the table.

Gabriel returned with two cups of green tea and handed her one. ‘Tea first, then wine.’

She took the cup and smiled at him, laying her head back against the couch.

‘When do you start the new job?’ he said.

‘Monday.’

‘Tell me you won’t take her back this time.’
A wave of shock travelled through her. She sat up but avoided Gabriel’s eye. ‘Come on, Gabe. I’m all she has.’

‘No, she has Artie.’ Gabriel let out a frustrated breath. ‘And I’ve got Tom now. It’s not as easy as it used to be.’

‘What d’you mean?’ Lena looked at him, incredulous. The teacup tilted in her hand.

He lowered his voice. ‘You know, Lena. You pick up the pieces for her. Then I pick up the pieces for you. That’s how it goes. See?’

The heavy ache in Lena’s stomach pinned her to the couch. She watched Gabriel throw back his handsome black head and laugh at something Tom said. A mean little voice, a thin jealous voice chimed, unwelcome, in her head: my best friend.
Chapter 10

Felix woke and checked the digital clock beside him on the bedside table: it was 10.02. He’d slept late. He sat up and pulled his big duffle bag across the carpet, then rummaged inside. He found Jozef’s yellow envelope.

The gallery catalogue fell open to reveal the paper clipping tucked inside the front cover. There, in faint pencil scrawl on the first page was an Australian mobile phone number, next to a name: Joyce. The day before the funeral he’d called her. Told her the bad news about Jozef; mentioned that he was arriving. She suggested they meet. By now, she would be wondering what was taking him so long.

The name reminded him of his purpose and he felt a new surge of energy: he saved Joyce’s number into his mobile then dialed room service and booked a taxi for an hour’s time. He found his running shoes, shorts and a t-shirt and put them on, trying to remember the map of Darlinghurst from the wall in the hotel lobby. There was a bay close by, Rushcutters Bay: up the hill, a block or two west. A suitable running route. He pulled the hotel room door closed behind him and walked to the lift, shaking life into his arms.

He jogged out the door and up the hill towards the bay, away from the city. The noise of the traffic seemed to ring in his ears after the air-conditioned hum of the hotel room. He waited for his body to wake up; each jarring step alerted the stiff and travel-weary muscles to their new task. The hill grew steeper; he bowed his head and committed to the struggle.

Halfway up he paused, hands on knees. He noticed mud from Jozef’s garden still caked on his trainers and felt a distant twinge of guilt. On Kate’s last
visit, they went out to the back garden and she helped him to pull up the last of Jozef’s summer vegetables. She knelt beside him and laughed as the knees of her jeans got muddy and he had longed to pull her onto the grass in the sun, to fuck her there and then, to try to remember what they had meant to each other.

But she was wary of him and stayed at arm’s length. She ran a hand across her forehead and laughed.

‘What will I do with all this?’ she asked.

‘Make soup. I don’t know.’

She brushed the dirt from her hands and looked back at the house.

‘I’m sorry he’s dead. Not sorry, too,’ she said.

Felix saw the defiance in her eyes.

‘I wanted him to die. I thought I’d get you back. Now I don’t want you back but I’m still glad. You can’t stay here forever.’

Here: she had meant the house but also the unsatisfying life. He looked at the dirty bunch of carrots in his hand and felt sadder, then, than he had felt on the day of the funeral.

‘I let you down. I didn’t mean to.’

She shrugged. He saw that the time for apologies had passed.

Her eyebrows creased.

‘I want to have a baby, you know.’

Then she let her arms drop to her sides and her body curled forwards towards the wet dirt, and she cried silently, her whole body tugged downwards with the force of it. He stared up at the summer sky, emptied out.

Now he set off again on the balls of his feet, up the steep hill. He passed terraced houses, then a café with neat little stools outside. He crossed a road with
a pub on the corner and realized he’d reached the top of the hill — had gone past it, in fact — and was running down, into a little park with a Victorian bandstand.

He jogged through the park and stopped on the pavement as the world around him suddenly filled with urgent noise and activity. An ambulance pulled into a long driveway opposite him — he saw the Emergency Department sign and realized he had arrived at a hospital. He remembered that he’d seen that on the map, too. He stood and watched, drawing deep breaths into his lungs, as a resuscitation team arrived at the swinging doors of the emergency entrance to meet the ambulance. The body on the trolley was whisked away, the paramedics running beside it.

He’d seen it up close, during his internship: the feet pounding down the corridor, the group sweeping into the resuscitation room, reaching for the defibrillator.

He wiped the sweat from his forehead and felt his heart hammering.

‘All the good brains do medicine,’ Salil had said, when they were in their last year of school. ‘I’ll be a surgeon. But you’re good enough to be a hospital doctor. Or a GP.’

It was typical Salil — unthinkingly arrogant, so sure of himself — but by then, Felix had become used to life in the deep shadow of his best friend’s achievements.

He turned to look up the street. Dusty liquidambar trees shuddered in the wind, bare in winter. A drunk man slumped by a sandstone wall, a tilting bottle in his hand.

Felix’s chest was still heaving with the effort of the run. That was enough for today. The bay could wait.
He turned to retrace his footsteps slowly across the park, but another ambulance appeared around the corner and he found himself turning back to watch. He held his breath and watched the spectacle unfold.

Back at the hotel, he showered and then went to the window to watch as he pulled on his jeans. Below, a column of traffic snaked up the hill. Overhead, an airplane tore across the sky, low and noisy. He checked the time again: almost 11.15.

The watch slid on his wrist. He felt sudden disgust for the watch: it was an emblem of his father’s influence, his brand. He remembered Jozef taking it apart and putting it back together after one father-son fishing trip to Brighton, when he was ten. He gashed his hand cutting frozen bait on the windy pier. Underneath the flesh he saw a notch of white bone. My skeleton, he thought, as he sank to his knees on the old boards.

‘I warned you about that knife,’ Jozef yelled.

It was true: Jozef had warned him about standing too close to the edge; about currents that drag you under; about the emetic effects of swallowing too much sea water; and about a drowning man’s eyes, that pop out of their sockets in the body’s efforts to surface. Felix watched the blood pooling before him on the bleached boards of the pier and fainted.

At the local doctor’s surgery, Jozef cheered up.

‘See? The human body’s a masterpiece of evolution,’ Jozef had said. ‘A magnificent system. When students leave my class, they’ll never look at another man and see him as a number.’

Felix remembered the light in his father’s face as he told him this.
When they got back to London, Jozef called Felix over to the table in the living room.

‘A treat,’ he said, and Felix knew this really meant a lesson. He felt weak and wary of his father but went and stood by his side. Then Jozef removed the special gold watch, took a tiny screwdriver to the back and started to take the thing apart.

‘What are you doing? You’ll bloody wreck it!’

‘Don’t say bloody. Just watch.’

Felix’s bad hand throbbed but Jozef carried on, explaining as he went, gently extracting the cogs and coils with tiny tweezers. He lay it out, like a universe of suns and stars on a red linen table napkin.

‘Now,’ said Jozef when the twinkling cosmos of silver pieces was completely exposed, ‘we put it back together. Each piece in its place.’

But looking at the eviscerated watch, Felix felt cold dread. He knew that his father was attempting a metaphor. Felix had seen the bone in his hand and knew he wasn’t mechanical like a watch, made of neatly interlocking parts. A body was different, subject to dark and inexplicable forces. His loneliness and fear — they didn’t have parts.

Felix saw the future, that evening. He understood, in a vague and uncomfortable way, that his father’s beliefs made Jozef vulnerable. He sensed he would have to shelter Jozef and that their lives might gradually overlap. He was reminded of a science experiment they’d done at school, in which two drops of ink, sitting side by side, eventually merged due to their internal cohesive forces. A feeling of sadness and disappointment came over him. He was ten and not yet
old enough to know that having a father like Jozef could mean the collapse of certain private dreams. But he had a sense of it, somehow.
Chapter 11

Felix looked around. So, he thought. This is Bondi Beach. One of the places on Jozef’s list of tourist destinations. I expected something bigger.

He paused in the shade of a cafe awning and dialed Joyce’s number. A short voicemail message came on: Leave a message for Joyce. He heard a trace of northern England in the voice, just barely there in the alloy of flattened vowels. Perhaps Joyce and his father had met in England? He hesitated a moment before leaving his name and number on her voicemail.

He took in the view — the wide scoop of the sandy beach and the paved boardwalk above the sand; the art deco apartment blocks that flanked each other, incongruously tall and narrow, their colours pastel and quaint. Seagulls wheeled and screeched above the boardwalk and a spray of sand, flung by the gusting wind, peppered his shins. He caught the sharp smell of the sea and felt an immediate thrill.

He watched the waves at the south end of the beach crash onto the sand. The place was impressive, he saw. A pleasing natural bay, a generous suntrap.

It was around midday and people had come out in force to enjoy the break in the wet weather. He crossed the boardwalk strip and descended the concrete steps to the beach. He took a couple of staggering steps on the sand then looked down at his incongruous brown leather shoes. The sight of them gave him a pang of sadness — they were shoes made for another life, unmatched to their surroundings. He straightened up and looked out past the breaking waves to the horizon, tried to focus on the weak colours crossing the sky.
Until now, he realised, he’d been ushered through events by the force of the momentum created by Jozef’s death. He hadn’t stopped to consider his actions in any great depth; he had felt bound to put one foot in front of the other and let the sequence of events carry him. He was here, now, because he hadn’t been able to think of a good reason not to come; and because the life he had known, as a husband and son, was not recognisable in the remnants left behind by Jozef’s death and Kate’s departure.

In short: leaving London came naturally.

He followed the southbound walkers and joggers along the beach path around the coastline, past a glass and concrete café perched over a concrete pool, which was set against the side of the cliff. He paused for a minute to watch the swimmers below and felt a sympathetic chill go through him. He turned and walked on, joining a cliff pathway that curved around the sandstone rock face in the direction of another rocky cove. The sun warmed his face in spite of the brisk wind. The ceaseless interrogations of the peevish inner voice that had woken him this morning — what are you doing here? Where is this going? What next? — began to recede. He picked up the pace and walked quickly now, unzipping his jacket.

Soon, he reached a little café at the park beside the beach and went to the counter. He ordered a coffee and sat down in the plastic seat. The wind whipped around him. He sipped his coffee, nerves still jangling. Moments later the phone rang. Coffee sloshed over the side of the cup as he scrambled to answer it.

‘Hello?’

‘Felix!’ Joyce’s voice boomed into the phone. ‘Are you coming up?
‘Pardon?’

‘Are you coming up here? Pittwater, about an hour from the city. Scotland Island to be exact. You won’t regret it, there’s nowhere like it.’

‘Oh.’

‘Take you for a ride in my boat if you like.’ He heard her light a cigarette and let out a big breath of smoke. ‘Go on. I’d like to see Jozef’s boy again.’

‘Again?’ He felt himself losing his grip on the conversation.

She laughed, a big throaty smoker’s laugh. Manchester, Felix thought. Not a scouser; not Liverpool.

‘You bet. But you were still in nappies back when I saw you last.’

He paused. ‘When should I come?’

‘When? Come now.’

Within an hour of his conversation with Joyce, he was behind the wheel of a shiny white Peugeot 308. He turned the key in the ignition and felt a flood of relief. What he needed was to move, to get going. He turned on the radio and tuned it to the first decent music station he could find. Then he turned it up loud.

He could think himself to a standstill sometimes. Kate nagged him about this trait — his tendency for absorption, to put it in the kinder phrases he remembered from distant school reports. Or his fucking dissociative passive aggression, to use her words. She regarded it as a deliberate attempt to undermine their relationship.

The road north took Felix across the Roseville Bridge, a wide six-lane span that crossed a harbor inlet flanked by wooded banks. He accelerated into the
outside lane. The Peugeot was fast and smooth to drive, and the leather cover of
the steering wheel felt cool in his hands. He glanced down at the water below:
the crossing meant he was now north of the harbor and travelling away from the
city.

What would Joyce make of him, he wondered? Would he have to explain
himself? Would she ask him to describe Jozef’s death? The thought appalled
him. In a rush, some images he’d forgotten came back: Jozef at his school
graduation. Jozef and Kate at the dining table on their rare and awkward family
dinners.

He remembered his first glimpse of Kate. Remembered how much he
had wanted her. And — he may as well admit it now — what she meant.

Salil had spotted Kate in their first year of university. She’d been
stretched out on lawn of the university quadrangle, hair spread out across her
shoulders. Like a thoroughbred, Salil had said, and as they got closer Felix could
hear her nice accent. Felix and Salil were eating sandwiches, walking in the
shade of the University College Classics building. Felix had made lunch —
bread from three days ago with tomato and cheese, which was all they could
afford until their student loans paid out.

‘You should get a girl like that,’ Salil had said, picking at his teeth.
‘Someone normal-looking. Establishment.’

Felix looked at Kate across the grass then down at the rinds of crust in the
creased brown paper in his hands. An insoluble equation formed in his head, one
that related the shining girl to the ghastly lunch. Someone like her, he thought,
could never like someone like me. He tossed the paper into the bin and turned to
back to gaze at her once more. Then Salil called to him from several yards away.
‘Come on dozy.’

In those days, Felix and Salil were sharing a bedsit in Clapham and studying at University College Medical School. The arrangement sent Jozef out of his mind with worry but Felix was happy. He and Salil were only moderately reckless. They took speed bombs on the weekend, little wraps of god-knows-what that you washed down with pints of cider, and ate baked beans out of cans. They thought everything important could be read about in the NME.

He tightened his grip on the steering wheel and felt a surge of fondness for this younger, simpler self. Do needs simply multiply in proportion to age and prosperity? We got by on so little, he thought. We expected so little from the world.

They came across Kate later that same week at a mixer for the Bishop’s Pricks, the university chess club. Felix admired her secretly, silently collecting the flashes of her smile. He marvelled at her straight white teeth and the promising plunge at the vee of her jumper. Felix trailed in his friend’s shadow, filling his pockets with free beer nuts, watching. Someone gave him a glass of wine, then another and he thought of tremendous opening lines but the moment for introductions passed and the night grew late.

He vomited in the fountain outside the University Refectory. Kate went home with Salil in a minicab. Felix walked back alone under a moonless sky, picking nasty bits off the front of his Oxfam jumper.

Felix met Kate properly when he found her in the bedsit bathroom the next morning, in knickers and shirt, going through the drawers.

He cleared his throat. ‘Excuse me, what are you doing?’

She barely turned her head. ‘Looking for tampons, actually.’
He blushed scarlet. It was horribly intimate.

‘But me and Salil live here. Ergo no tampons,’ he said.

‘Ergo you never have girls around here, you mean. Actually.’

It gave him a pang, that second haughty ‘actually’. It nearly toppled him.

Actually I love you. Actually, we’re made for each other.

‘No. Well, yes,’ he said.

She turned around, screwed up her thoroughbred nose and giggled.

‘Can you stop staring? I’m crossing my legs here.’

‘Oh. Gosh.’

Felix looked at the ceiling, flushing again to the roots of his hair. Kate squeezed past him into the hallway with a little laugh. He was in love.

Six years passed before he saw her again. He came across her, by pure chance, at a party of a mutual friend in a warehouse in Hackney. She was already working then, slaving away, she told him, at a low-ranking job with a regional broadcaster. She drank quickly as she talked and he observed her. Her hair seemed messier, she’d had some kind of rock and roll cut. But she’s just the same, he’d thought drunkenly, jubilantly. That night he got the opportunity to try out his opening lines at last.

When he thought about it now, he realised that he couldn’t say when things started to go bad with Kate. It was only clear that they had. He remembered her attempts to articulate her unhappiness.

‘I’m getting older,’ she said. ‘I want more than this. Things feel so fucking mechanical. Well? Aren’t they?’

He tried to understand. Trouble was, the way she described it, a simple life, the life they had both dreamed about, began to seem complex and
unattainable. Six years of being together and he felt he knew her less and less. She had begun to slip out of focus for him. They tried for a baby but she approached the whole business with a cynicism he found vaguely appalling.

She had her first affair sometime before: a silly fling, a party poke, she called it. He brushed it off uneasily and they carried on. The damage was done simply in the passing of time; in the accumulation of a thousand small disappointments. Then she met Pete at work, who was willing, she told him, to pay her the attention she deserved.

When things came to an end, he recognised something clearly: all along Kate had shown she was ill at ease with Jozef. Kate was no different to so many people he’d met, who saw Jozef as having been permanently branded by tragedy. Jozef knew about life in extremis; he had seen things that they could only guess at, the imagined horror of which caused one to shudder. Because of this, he was not to be trusted.

Around Jozef, Kate pretended to a seriousness that didn’t come naturally, as if she feared he would find her trivial. When Felix asked her, teasingly, about these things she flushed and said, exasperated, that lying to his father was perfectly understandable. Hadn’t he been lying all along too?

She was right, of course.

I didn’t mean to hurt anyone, Felix thought now. But he knew, simply, that he and Kate were finished and that Kate would not forgive him for failing to live up to her expectations. He slowed the car at the traffic lights, then turned off Pittwater Road towards Church Point, following Joyce’s directions.

He knew, too, that his problems and Jozef’s were entangled. He felt a band of anxiety tighten around his solar plexus.
Chapter 12

Ice cream dripped down Daniel Faber’s sunspotted wrists onto the cuffs of his Roberto Cavalli business shirt. He felt a surge of annoyance. People would notice his shirt sleeves and think he was letting himself go. Getting batty, incapable. The young are routinely cruel to the old, he thought. All out for themselves.

He wiped a smear from his chin with his fingertip. No wonder we old bastards lose our minds, he thought. Who can stand to be patronised all the time?

Andrew was due in a few minutes. It was their agreement: Daniel turned a blind eye to certain of Andrew’s habits, while Andrew tactfully helped him with the day to day things that were beginning to be a nuisance. Getting to the gallery and back, for instance.

He frowned. He was becoming reliant on people. Mind you, Andrew’ll be fuming, he thought, when he finds me covered in ice cream in the back garden instead of waiting by the front gate with an expression of gratitude; which is what the idiot expects despite knowing me for so many fucking years.

He leant his head against the wall and looked out over his garden. If you can call it that, he thought. It was a fashionable rectangle of spiky things in pots, designed by strangers, for which he felt no affection. But at this time of the morning, a little sun warmed the bench and the concrete wall, so he found himself here most days, sharing the warmth with his plants.

He longed for a glass of water but the effort of the walk into the kitchen seemed too great. This winter he noticed his body turn a corner past the curious twilight that people quaintly referred to as ‘late middle age’ or ‘advancing years’ and squarely into old age. He sensed his own deterioration approaching; every
now and then the turn of a knee would remind him that the cartilage there wouldn’t last forever. He play-acted the deaf old fool for the amusement of the gallery staff but it was the lie that hid the truth of his failing faculties. That flutter in his chest — well, there was a story there for the doctor to read.

Some men were already old at his age, he reminded himself. But I’m not like them.

He licked his fingers. One is old enough, at 79, he thought, to know pain of all kinds. Ah, but the strongest — still, after so many sentimental years — is the pain of love. New love, with its tormenting uncertainty; mature love, with its compromises; and unrequited love, of course — a pain so sweet one can hardly stand it. But stand it one must.

Lena would understand, he thought. Lena with her strange flamboyance and her macabre, awful scar. He sucked at the ice cream spoon and thought dreamily about Lena’s long legs. Then, happily, about her first day of work. Today.

He sighed. People had told him to expect a certain softening with age, a transformation of attitude, a fuzziness and contentment. Instead he felt a new upwelling of desire, something liminal and urgent. There was much more he wanted to tell Lena. He sensed she was susceptible to love stories. He had tried to tell himself that what he felt for Lena was an old man’s care — a pure kind of love — but he let out a derisive snort, as he thought of it now. He meant her no harm, at least.

He stretched his legs out in front of him. The girl’s thesis was well received. God knows, the hours they put into it, he and her! They could write a biography, why not? A full account of the Valerie stuff. People had an appetite
for it, obviously. There were calls all the time. He thought about the way Lena’s face had changed when he talked to her about Valerie. There’s a danger there, he thought. When you covet someone else’s memories, it shows you can’t bear your own.

When she arrived at his gallery on the first day of the interviews and stood at the door of his office in her brown check suit and her neat click-clacking red high heels, he looked her up and down. A satisfying five seconds passed as his gaze travelled over her face, her body, her ridiculous shoes. He watched the blush creep across her cheeks. He could have a little fun here, he saw. He invited her in and announced he would begin, appropriately, with the most important day of his life: the day he met Valerie Dawson. He let a little extra volume creep into his voice and, he admitted to himself now, he rather liked the way it sounded.

Lena placed her tape recorder on the centre of the desk and took a step back. She stared back at him for a long second or two, one eyebrow a skeptical arch.

‘This isn’t for Women’s Weekly, you know.’

She judged him and dismantled his bravado in an instant.

He smiled back, disarmed but delighted. ‘No, quite. This is for history. For the public record.’

She returned his smile a degree cooler and handed him the plug of the recorder. We’ll see, her look said. He liked her spirit.

He settled back in his chair and told her about meeting Valerie for the first time. It was 1959, he said. He had just had his twenty-eighth birthday and he’d been called to a smart house in Kirribilli to value a painting, a small Von Guerard. It was to be bought by an expatriate Australian living in London. Frank
Dawson wanted to avoid gossip about the sale because the painting would be leaving the country, so he bypassed the colonial experts as the Art Gallery of NSW and chose Daniel instead. I was reasonably well regarded even then, he told Lena. My accent was stronger; it enhanced my image.

But more to the point, he said, he was young and he was an outsider, which made him perfect for this particular job. He would do, according to Frank Dawson, if he could keep the story under his hat. Nobody liked to hear about good Australian art heading overseas. Still don’t.

Daniel told Lena that he walked from Milsons Point station in the heat of the day to the grand old sandstone house. He took his hat off at the door and looked back towards the harbour. It was a tremendous view. A maid appeared — a maid, think of it! — and showed him through the hallway where he noticed a Constable sketch and Whistler-style landscape. In those days, they were the ‘real’ art, art with proper value. The Von Guerard was a hobby collector’s piece — historically valuable but hardly an investment. The maid took him through the house to a room filled with books and comfortable chairs, with patio doors that opened onto the small back garden surrounded by a high wall.

He leaned towards Lena at this point: he remembered how a whiff of her rose perfume had surprised him.

I didn’t notice the girl at first, he told Lena, his voice falling to a shade above a whisper. She was curled up on the corner sofa with her feet tucked underneath her. Which goes to show that the most important moments of your life sometimes ambush you from the corners of the ordinary days. Days when you expect so little.

Lena had looked back at Daniel, a faint light shining in her eyes.
Valerie was lying on the couch, invisible as a spider on a leaf. The maid showed Daniel into the sitting room and told him to wait.

Then the girl on the couch startled him, throwing the newspaper to the floor and swinging her feet to the ground.

‘Idiots! Have you heard?’

Daniel took a step back in surprise. She was fine featured, beautifully dressed in tailored pants and blouse.

‘No, I haven’t heard. Will we have another war?’

She thrust the paper at him, pointing to an article.

‘Yes. They’ve declared it. Blackman and Boyd and that lot.’

He took the article. A group of Australian artists, it said, including Charles Blackman and Arthur Boyd, had banded together under the name ‘the Antipodeans’ to defend Australian figurative art against the vogue for abstraction. He read the earnest piece: at the very moment when Australian art was forming its own distinctive identity, they claimed, pure abstraction threatened to annihilate all tradition in art.

Daniel smiled at Valerie. She looked sixteen. ‘I see. War.’

She lit a cigarette and frowned at him.

‘Parochial fools. I suppose you agree with them.’

He revised his estimation: she was older than he’d thought — nineteen perhaps, or twenty. ‘No, actually. I like abstract art. It tells a story.’

‘Exactly!’ She smiled now, excitement widening her eyes. ‘A story about form. About freedom and escape and new ideas.’ She drew on the cigarette.

‘Are you a Communist?’ she asked. ‘I am.’
She sat down again abruptly on the couch; the ash from her cigarette dangled over a fine Persian carpet.

‘If you’re for art, you have to be for Communism.’

‘I see.’ He stooped and cupped his hand to catch the ash from her cigarette. ‘When you leave for the commune, you’ll give all this up then?’

He tilted his head to take in the room: the oak sideboard bearing a Wedgewood tea set on a silver tray, the clawfooted leather chairs, the luxurious oriental soft furnishings.

She leapt to her feet and strode across the room then threw the cigarette onto the patio bricks where it smouldered.

‘You don’t even know me. Apologise!’

‘Why?’ He didn’t smile then. Instead, he walked past her to the patio doors instead and brushed the ash from his hands onto the bricks outside. She stared at him. He felt quick disgust.

Frank Dawson walked in then and hurried across the room to shake Daniel’s hand.

‘Sorry to keep you, has V been frightening you?’

Daniel laughed stiffly. ‘Not at all. We were just talking politics.’

Frank sighed. ‘Grim business, Vietnam. The Americans will turn it into a proper bloody war.’

Daniel lifted his shoulders, sent a sideways glance to Valerie. She smiled back, a flicker of something in her eyes. He felt a sudden, thrilling camaraderie; they shared a confidence.

‘I’m sure they have their reasons,’ he said.

‘I suppose so.’
Frank ignored Valerie, who sat rigid on the sofa, glaring up at him.

I had it wrong, thought Daniel. He thinks her a nuisance, a pest.

‘Come on, I’ll show you the picture.’ Frank led the way out.

Daniel gave a final glance in the direction of the sofa. Valerie stared back at him as he went through the door but this time he detected something else — disappointment, perhaps.

Later, as they looked over the Von Guerard in Frank Dawson’s study, Frank poured whisky and advised him never to have daughters.

‘We had her too late,’ he said. ‘She’s the last of five. Good luck to any man who tries to get around her.’ Frank handed the glass to Daniel. ‘Do me a favour? Take her to the movies. She gets restless, staying around the house like this.’

Daniel took the glass and raised it slowly to his lips.

When Frank showed him out the front door later, Daniel found Valerie sitting on the front wall of the house, looking out across the street to the harbour. She looked up at him with that same serious frown and stubbed out her cigarette.

‘I’m going to New York to meet Mark Rothko,’ she had said. ‘Would you like to come?’

A horn tooted in the street outside and the ice cream spoon clattered onto the terracotta tiles. Daniel used the wall behind him to launch himself, straight-kneed, to his feet.

He shuffled to the door, heard the angry horn tooting again. He stopped, unhurried, by the kitchen tap to fill and drink a glass of water before making his
way to the front door. In the hallway he said a silent goodbye, as always, to Valerie’s paintings that covered the walls of the house.
Chapter 13

Lena slid one arm into the Thai silk jacket she kept for special occasions. The touch of the fabric sent a thrill along the length of her scar and she admired the sleeve briefly in the mirror, saw the pleasing way the cuff came neatly to the top of her hand, before sliding her left arm into the other sleeve. She took in her entire reflection. The jacket was a shot blue-green, the colour of peacock feathers. It had tiny pearl buttons on the front and came to her waist. She wore a flouncy royal blue skirt that came to above her knee and seamed stockings. The distinctive clash of blues made this, she felt, the perfect outfit for her first day at Daniel’s gallery.

Oh, and happy birthday self, she said to her reflection. Thirty today.

She tied back her hair. Daniel would expect her for lunch to celebrate her first day; she wouldn’t be able to resist telling him about her birthday. He has a knack for ceremony, she thought, he’ll be pleased. She collected her keys and her wallet then pulled the door of her flat closed behind her.

On the bus she checked her mobile phone again: there were no missed calls. She hunched into her seat, wondering how her mother could have forgotten to call on such a special day.

The bus shunted slowly along Oxford Street and she stared out the window. Birthdays were always horrible. She had come to dread them.

On her fourteenth birthday, she had arrived at 8.15 am at her new high school and made her way immediately to the big tarmac quadrangle, then scanned it for the best place to hide. She spotted the outbuildings away to the side of the oval and started walking. Behind her the first bell went. When she got to the sheds, there was a tall Asian boy, sitting with his back propped against the
steel shed wall, smoking a cigarette and reading a Chinese comic. He looked up, waiting for her to speak. His shirt and tie were neat and there were merit badges on his blazer. He shook his chunky black hair out of his eyes.

‘What you staring at?’

‘Nothing,’ she muttered.

She was stunned by the paradox of him — smoking in that blazer all covered in awards — and she didn’t know what to say. She looked around hastily for an avenue of escape but by now the playing field was empty. He stared back at her, scrutinising the knotted crepe of her bandaged shoulder. The doctor had showed her how to change the bandages herself but she’d done it in a rush today. She tugged at the shoulder of her cardigan and covered the mess she’d made of it.

The boy stood up and scratched out his cigarette end with the toe of his shoe. He was tall and his face seemed so adult she was a little afraid. He could be nineteen.

‘They come looking around here after second bell so you’d better go.’

She couldn’t help it. ‘But you stink of cigarettes. Don’t they bust you?’

He shrugged and started walking up to the quad. He turned. ‘I tell you, they come looking.’

Then he was gone, hunched into his blazer, backpack over one shoulder.

Lena sat down anyway and put her head on her knees. When the Vice-Principal arrived ten minutes later, she cried but she got a detention anyway.

The next day she went early and found Gabriel there again. She smoked one of his Singaporean cigarettes, even though she’d nicked enough of her mum’s to know that smoking wasn’t for her. He treated her kindly, told her that
he didn’t give a shit about the rules, not really, but he was here to get an
education so he made sure he didn’t miss a scrap of it.

‘You should too,’ he said, looking at her faded uniform and her
conspicuous injury.

Gabriel became her friend — her first real, proper friend since primary
school. He worked most nights at a pizza bar on Pittwater Road and lived with
his older brother who studied medicine at Sydney Uni. He spoke to his parents in
Singapore on the phone once a week and basically took care of himself. He was
fifteen. After school sometimes she visited his rented flat, overawed by their
sophistication. The Chang boys had a big telly and a dishwasher but no pictures
or photos on the walls. To Lena, their place was an empty paradise. She took her
sketchpads and drew intricate, sarcastic cartoons that made him laugh. Some of
them made it onto the blank walls.

One evening, as they ate cold pizza at the breakfast bar, flicking
pineapple chunks into the sink, Gabriel cornered her.

‘I should meet your mum.’

‘Why?’

He’d frowned. ‘Because you’ve seen where I live so you should show me
your house.’

Lena meant to explain that her mum wasn’t into visitors; that they pretty
much kept to themselves. But that wasn’t what came out.

‘Nope. No way.’

‘Why not?’

‘Because I hate my mum.’ She had started to cry, a great big messy cry,
wobbling on her bar stool. The cold pizza fell into her lap.
It gave Lena an unpleasant jolt, now, to think about Gabriel. The bus shuddered to a stop and she climbed down the step onto the curb of Oxford Street. She turned and walked down the hill into Paddington. She didn’t want to be late but there was no use running in heels, she’d just break an ankle.

She hurried up the gallery steps and through the glass doors. She put her bag down on the counter and called down to the back office.

‘Hello.’

‘Lena!’ Daniel came out of the room and made his way — rather stiffly, she thought — to the reception. They were both struck, then, by a sudden awkwardness. By the end of the time she spent with him when she was researching her PhD, they parted as friends, with a kiss on the cheek. But that hardly seemed suitable now. He was her employer.

He held out his hand for her to shake and laughed loudly.

‘We’ll shake hands. You know in Bollywood films they aren’t allowed to kiss lips? So they kiss hands. Most erotic.’

She let him plant a dry kiss on her hand. ‘Just this once, because it’s my birthday,’ she said.

He proclaimed the need for a national holiday, then ushered her through to the back office.

Andrew shook hands with Lena and muttered, ‘Welcome to the jungle.’

Lena and Daniel went back through the gallery to the front desk. Daniel bowed and excused himself.

‘Sorry, duty calls.’

‘No need for an apology,’ she said.
Andrew appeared at the reception and held the glass doors open for Daniel, who hesitated at the open door and turned one last time to Lena.

‘I was thinking about another project. A full biography,’ he said. He walked down the stairs out the front with Andrew’s help and she watched him go, wincing. In spite of the bravado, he wasn’t looking his best.

When he was gone, she stood in the pool of light on the white stone floor inside the glass doors. Andrew came back up the stairs and passed her, returning to the back office. The smell of the place hasn’t changed, she thought — a tinge of cleaning products and subtle air freshener but also, the smell of paintings, as if the oils were still drying on the canvases on the walls. I must be imagining it, she thought as she walked into the grandest of the galleries, to the right of the reception desk.

She wandered from one painting to the next, thinking about Daniel and his rickety legs. Obviously, there were things around here that one, for the sake of harmony, just didn’t mention.

As her PhD research had come near to its end, her interviews with Daniel sometimes stretched to three or four hours. At times Lena thought he would never stop talking. Forgive me, he said. Who knows, it could be my last chance.

Lena indulged him. She was lucky to find such a willing subject; let him talk. And it was compelling to listen to a man undone by an ancient love.

‘Valerie was something else, I tell you,’ he’d say. ‘But cold. You have to understand that.’

She caught the contradiction in his heart, the years-old ache.

On the day of her last interview, Daniel called her into the little kitchen at the back of the gallery. She had come to know it well in the course of their
meetings — the old wooden cupboard, the metal sink, the paint-splattered rough boards.

Daniel lowered himself slowly into a chair. His joints were stiff; she could see that the simplest movements caused him to wince.

‘What will you do after this?’ he asked.

The question had taken her by surprise. She hadn’t really thought that far ahead. After she completed the interviews, she was obliged to write as fast as she could simply to meet her submission date. Life after that was unclear.

‘Would you settle for a lousy job?’ He smiled at her.

I should be aiming at least for an assistant curator’s position, she thought. But instead she laughed and said: ‘I’d settle for a lousy job in your gallery.’

‘We can’t take you now. But perhaps in a few months.’

‘I’d like that very much.’

Lena knew Daniel’s role was confined these days to being the gallery’s figurehead. He took an interest in new painters. The rest — the buying and selling, the shows with the established artists — he left to Andrew.

Lena considered Daniel’s offer as she made tea for the both. Then Daniel stood up, unfolding himself from the chair in stages.

‘Here, help me,’ he said. ‘Bring your cup. I want you to have a look at something.’

He took her arm and steered her down the passage to the storeroom at the back. He moved slowly and Lena knew it was important not to rush him or draw attention to his frailty. When they reached the end of the room, she saw a large abstract triptych in oils mounted on the walls.
He gestured to them. ‘What do you think? I had them hang the three paintings here so I can look and think. I might give him his first solo show.’

The first piece was a swirling composition of bright raw-meat reds and fatty yellows. A figure seated, suggested only by the hulking outline of a back. A gaping maw, shown in profile. Perhaps a table.

She took a breath. ‘I see a self-portrait: the artist as a fat man, devouring beauty. But it only makes him ugly. And by now he’s colossal. He stinks, he’s vile.’

Daniel raised his eyebrows.

The second canvas was quieter, a play of smoke colours and tangerine. This time Lena saw a primitive face, an eye turned upwards, as if looking into its own head.

She laughed. ‘This is a mirror.’

Daniel laughed too, as they approached the third canvas. This time Lena felt the painting like a hand tugging at her insides. Now the cyclic swirls had become a vortex and the vast energetic system orbited two small figures, thin and grotesque, lying like fallen twigs. The artist had deepened the palate to include heavy iron reds and awful purples. The surface of the paint was ribboned with bluish veins. The eye was drawn into the circling current of the painting but the bodies lay there like a terrible reef at the heart of it, causing the wave to break and crash.

Lena felt her breath draw in slowly. The rhythm of the painting made her forget her centre for a second. It was dizzying. Moments like these were the point of it all, she thought. Art sometimes offered you a real chance to see into yourself, and truth was the only response. She turned to Daniel.
‘It’s brilliant. I see failure and disconnection. Futility.’

‘Go on.’

‘Ruin and poverty in spite of all this … this richness and abundance.’ She gestured to the canvas. ‘Small lives and wasted dreams.’

The thoughts flew into her mind unbidden: I could tell you about my mother. About what it was like. A brittle silence followed. Her sincerity took them both by surprise.

Daniel smiled at her and cleared his throat. ‘But you can’t guess what the artist means, of course.’

Lena let her eye be drawn once again into the miasma as connections fired in her head. ‘We’re not supposed to assume anything.’

‘No.’

‘But if we were, I’d say he wants us to … well, to make love. Make art. Reproduce. Or at least to generate life, not annihilate it.’

Daniel had remained silent for a moment, one hand against the wall for support. He seemed tight with emotion, his skin ticking with the pressure. Then he let out a sigh that seemed to release him.

‘Yes. You’re probably right.’

Today the main gallery hosted a photographic exhibition. Lena took a breath before heading through the white expanse of the main gallery to Andrew’s office out the back; she knew she ought to make an effort with him. He was prickly; small talk didn’t come easily. Outside his office, she paused. A photo caught her eye: it was an old one of Valerie Dawson and Daniel Faber at the height of their fame. She hadn’t noticed it before; Daniel must have put it up since she was here
last. The photo caught him stunned by the flash bulb, in a moment of laughter, the strong, square face of Valerie behind his.

Her reverie was broken by the sounds of the doorbell. She turned and walked quickly back to the front desk. Andrew appeared behind her towing a low trolley and quickly took charge, speaking to the courier who waited by the glass front doors.

A second man arrived with several small wooden crates which he carried carefully up the stairs from a rented flatbed truck. He placed them gently onto the trolley. Andrew accompanied him up and down the stairs, chattering in a low voice. As they brought the last of the boxes through the door, Lena stepped forward to offer her help but Andrew jerked his head in the direction of the desk.

‘I'll take these. They’re going straight to a collector. You needn’t worry. I might take them there myself if you think you’ll be OK?’

He smiled again. ‘We’ll go over the exhibition schedule later. We have some good shows in spring.’

‘No problem,’ she said.

But she felt uncertain as she watched him wheel the trolley into the hallway and down to the back. She wondered if she’d just been fobbed off. And if so, why? There’s something about him that goes against the grain, she thought. I just can’t put my finger on it. She watched Andrew disappear along the hallway. Moments later, his obscenities carried from the back of the gallery. The old roller door closed noisily, signaling that he was gone.

Crates come in, crates go out, she thought. No-one writes anything down?
It seemed odd. No bits of paper signed, no discussion of the contents. Into the back of the car and whisked away. That’s how you deal with things that you don’t want people to know about, she thought. Secret things.

The quiet of the gallery was disturbed, suddenly, by the urgent trilling of her phone. She hurried back behind the reception desk and dug around in the bottom of her bag to retrieve it. She saw her mother’s name flashing on the display.

A wave of irritation swept over her. The phone pulsed, impatient, in her hand. She answered it glumly and Cristina launched into a chorus of ‘Happy Birthday’.
Chapter 14

Felix swung the hire car into a parking space at Church Point and switched off the engine. Scotland Island rose before him in the blue stretch of Pittwater, so close a person could almost swim across. From his short conversation with Joyce, he’d formed a rather different picture of the island in his mind — he had expected it to resemble the austere Scotland he knew from dreary childhood holidays. Instead, he found himself peering through the windscreen at a luxurious palette of coastal colours, which he recognised from his visit to Bondi — the same creamy sand, the rich greens of the awkward, rangy trees and the unmatched light that, even in winter, lent a soporific haze to the scene. Perhaps this is the key to Australia, he thought. That light, that puts a halo on everything. It makes every day seem like a holiday.

He got out of the car and started walking along the sandy path under the sheoaks in the direction of the wharf. The waterway was humming with motorcraft. To the left of the island reared a thickly wooded headland where the green of the eucalypts deepened, in places, to a muted blue-grey. He peered across at the houses tucked in behind trees on the sloping sides of the island, and at the tiny commuter boats that bobbed alongside the row of thin jetties. As he watched, a strong gust blew up the channel and the small boats moored close to the sand of Church Point swung at their moorings.

Moments later he came around the corner to the paved area beside a café and the sun emerged from behind a cloud. As he watched, a ferry pulled in with passengers lined up at the gate ready to disembark. The ferry driver secured the boat and let the passengers out. In the small crowd of people leaving the ferry, he spotted a woman he immediately guessed to be Joyce. She was tall and strongly
built and wore a broad cloth hat and a loose shirt. She strode ahead of the crowd and down the gangway of the wharf towards him. She smiled and raised her hand as she drew nearer, then stopped in front of him, her face pink with exertion. She looked him up and down.

‘Well, you’re Felicity’s son, no doubt about that. I’m Joyce.’

She took off her broad sunhat and stuck out her hand. He shook it. She gripped his arm and steered him back towards the ferry.

‘Let’s get on this tank before it leaves without us.’

He followed her down the gangway and leapt the small gap onto the waiting ferry. Joyce bought Felix a ticket, then led Felix to the bench at the back, which was open to the air and framed an exquisite view of the blue stretch of water. The driver sounded his horn and began to reverse the ferry out slowly.

Joyce leaned over and squeezed his hand. ‘First things first. I’m so sorry about your dad.’

*Your dad.* He felt a quiet pinch inside. Embarrassed, he slid his hand out from beneath her sweaty one.

‘Thanks.’ His voice rose to cover the roar of the ferry engine.

‘He told me he was planning to come. Months ago now. And he wanted you to come too. Been waiting to hear.’

Felix shook his head. ‘Did he tell you he was sick?’

‘Nope. Can’t say I’m surprised.’

He shot her a quick look. ‘He never mentioned you. Not in twenty-odd years.’
‘That useless bugger. No offence. Would have been nice to say good bye, is all.’ She gave him that smile again, her high beam, sweaty grin. They sat in silence as the first island stop drew near.

They stepped off the swaying vessel onto the stairs of the rough wooden jetty. Joyce led him along the sandy path of the foreshore and across the decks of several waterfront houses and finally up the steps to the door of an old cabin surrounded by tall, spindly gums.

‘Chez moi,’ she said grinning, patting her pockets for her keys. ‘The shack on millionaire’s row. And if any one of these trees decides to come down in this wind, we’ll die together.’

She opened the door and Felix followed her inside.

They finished their lunch of poached salmon and kipfler potatoes on Joyce’s uneven wooden balcony, looking out across Pittwater. Joyce’s old dog, Jake, sat at her feet and lifted his grey muzzle wearily every now and then. The weather had turned crisp but the day had lost nothing of its beauty. Felix watched the shaggy spotted gums sway on the steep decline towards the water. Below them, the bony finger of Joyce’s little jetty pointed out towards Church Point. He saw the ferry pull in to the Point and leave again with its new cargo of people.

Joyce leant back in the deck chair, following Felix’s gaze.

‘Bloody awful, that carpark. Half the time you can’t get a spot. Then when you do, good luck to you. They call it Pittwater Spares.’

‘The thieves can have my car, it’s rented.’

Joyce laughed. ‘They can have mine too if they want. Think of what I could do with the insurance money.’
She made a wide gesture to take in the walls of the ramshackle place. On either side of her house were modern houses with handsome decks and expanses of glass.

‘Not many like mine anymore,’ she said.

Felix looked around him. The veranda boards were grey with age and the house was small but he noticed the good art on the walls. He had passed shelves of books that he’d read. And, of course, there was the view — the shifting water, the trees animated by the wind, the luminous sky.

‘Your place is great. Really.’

‘I don’t mind being a thorn in the side of the up-graders.’

‘I’ll bet.’ He smiled. It was easy to like Joyce. Her open smile and her frankness put him at ease. He saw how Jozef would have enjoyed her company, in his quiet, reserved way.

When the wind started to shake the trees, Joyce suggested they move into the lounge. They sat around Joyce’s notched and scarred table. Felix ran his fingers across the top of it, taking in the worn surface. Here and there were daubs of paint: pink, white, dark green. Deep parallel lines scored the wood. It was a work table; a faithful accomplice to many years’ creative effort. While Joyce made tea, he sank back a little in his chair and reached for his bag. He pulled out the Daniel Faber catalogue and the dog-eared newspaper clipping and put them on the table. Before he had a chance to speak, Joyce reappeared with the tea and let out an exasperated sigh.

‘Oh, that business. Daniel Faber.’

She put the teapot down on the table and shook her head.

‘Jozef told you about it?’
‘Yes, of course. Last time he was here it was all he could talk about.’

Felix shook his head. ‘Tell me if I have this correct: you sent Jozef a photo of Daniel Faber. He said he recognized him.’

‘Yup. The boy in the barn, that’s what Jozef called him.’ Joyce’s voice was sympathetic.

‘He really came all this way because he saw a photo of a man and thought he recognised him as his brother’s killer? It’s fucking macabre.’

Joyce tutted. ‘Look. Give your dad some credit. He never did anything without a good reason. He saw a likeness. He was quite sure. Then there was the similarity in the names, of course.’

Felix fell silent.

‘I only hoped it would go well for him,’ Joyce continued.

Felix studied her expression. ‘He meant to tell me more.’

‘But?’

Felix looked at the floor, sentences drifting into his head. He should have asked. He hadn’t known how — and it wasn’t just Jozef’s quick illness that stopped him. When he was younger, he’d thought of Jozef as dwelling in a kind of vacuum, sucking up all the air. It was hardly possible to have one’s own thoughts or ideas. It didn’t help that the uncles venerated Jozef. It made Felix feel that his own problems were small.

Nevertheless, he should have let his father speak; things would seem clearer now. He glanced up at Joyce.

She heaved herself up and out of her chair and went across the room to an old bureau and opened a drawer. She pulled out a shallow shoebox of papers and
brought it back to the table. She fished around in the bottom of it, then drew out a slim stapled pile.

‘First things first. You need to read this.’

She handed the dog-eared sheaf of stapled sheets to him and he read the title Transcript: interview with Jozef Fabin, 1987.

‘You’ve never seen it before?’ she asked.

Felix shook his head as he accepted the bundle of paper. He turned to the first page but Joyce stopped him, hands raised.

‘Whoa. Not here. Take it back to your hotel.’

‘You’re kidding me.’

‘Really. You’ll want to be by yourself.’

‘What is it?’ He replaced the title page. There were things in Jozef’s past that he knew about and things he had guessed at. There were things he dared not think about.

‘Jozef promised more? It’s more. Read it, then you can read these.’ Joyce pulled out two handfuls of letters and lifted them, to show him.

‘Jesus. He wrote you all those?’

‘You bet. This lot counts for nearly thirty years. He was quite the international correspondent.’

Felix turned back to the pile of papers in his lap and smoothed the curled yellow corner of the front page of the pile in his lap and examined the faded letterhead: Kings College London.

‘He was one of my very best friends, your dad.’

She lifted their plates from the table and took them through to the kitchen.
He stood up carefully and placed the sheaf of paper on Joyce’s dining table. He heard her clattering about in the kitchen as he stepped quietly out to the blowy veranda. He steadied himself on the handrail and squinted into the oncoming wind.

He saw that by coming here he had begun a chain of events that would cause him to find out things that might change his idea of his father. Here, on the other side of the world from the place he and Jozef had spent their life together, was a stranger who claimed to hold the missing pieces of his father’s life in a cardboard box. He felt his grip tighten on the wooden veranda railing.

Later, Joyce coaxed him back inside with a bottle of wine and led him to a comfy chair. She told him there was no need for him to talk if he didn’t feel up to it — besides, she was happy to rabbit on. She figured she could give him an impression or two of his parents, both of them. Because she knew his mother too, you see.

He sat numbly and accepted the proffered glass of wine.

She met Jozef in the year before he was born, she told him. A god-awful year.

‘I moved down to London from Salford, near Manchester,’ she said. ‘Bloody miserable place.’

Felix let the wine release his anxiety and immersed himself in her story.

It was 1976. Joyce packed up her hopes and moved south. She chose to stay with a cousin in a share house in Fulham and found herself a job in a smart restaurant. Later that year she started teacher’s training at Goldsmith’s alongside
Felix’s mum, Felicity. Felicity was an older student, like her, trying for their teaching certificates after early disappointments.

‘What disappointments?’ His mother was a blank.

‘She wanted to act,’ said Joyce. ‘We teased her about it. She was a bit of a dreamer, your mum.’ She smiled at him, her face soft.

Joyce and Felicity met Jozef in the café on the campus, Joyce said. They learned, with calculated efficiency, that he was still unmarried and in his thirties. They took pity on him, or that’s what they told themselves. The simple fact was, they were all a bit lost, Joyce said. Drifting.

‘But your dad was fun in those days too,’ said Joyce. ‘Plus, we all looked up to him.’

Felicity and Jozef fell in love, she said. Soon Felicity was pregnant. They did what anyone would have done: a quick ceremony in the registry office in Clapham, the wedding dress from the Oxfam shop, hemmed hastily with pins. Then along you came, Joyce said.

‘What about her death?’ Felix asked.

Joyce sagged against the lumpy couch. ‘As you can imagine, Jozef was devastated. I don’t need to tell you.’

She cleared her throat gently and looked over at Felix.

‘Listen, it never occurred to me and Jozef to cross the lines of friendship because Felicity had always been there, at the centre of it all and because it was an innocent time for all of us. But when she died, all that changed. I left England a year after the funeral. But Jozef and I were together for a time. Before then.’

He nodded, a little shocked.
‘Jozef was a good man. A good friend.’ She reached for her tobacco pouch. ‘I didn’t betray your mother. It wasn’t like that.’

‘No. I understand.’ The tightness in his throat squeezed his voice into a new register.

Joyce shook her head. ‘See, Jozef cared about what people thought. His adoptive family, especially. What we did embarrassed him. It was so soon after you mother died. Sorry, I don’t want to get sentimental.’

‘No, don’t do that.’

They sat in silence for a while, watching the afternoon school ferry chug off around the island full of fidgety kids. Eventually, Joyce opened a second bottle of red and lit the pot-bellied stove. The conversation slid away from the subject of Jozef and onto Joyce’s life as a teacher — to her retirement, her garden, the kiln she built on the rocky ground out the back where she fired her ceramics.

Felix felt his eyes grow heavy and wondered if Joyce would suggest that he stay the night. Then a heaving southerly brought a quick evening storm up over the water. They finished the bottle and Joyce laughed, her voice loud from the wine, that there was no question about it now, he had to stay.

Felix slept out the southerly on the couch under her itchy woolen army surplus store blankets. His big feet hung off the end of the couch, where they were warmed by the burner. He fell into a deep and satisfying sleep, half-pissed and feeling wrung out.

When he woke up the next morning Joyce was clattering plates on the veranda. There was an icy chill in the air but the sky and the water sparkled. Out
in the towering eucalypts, a pair of rainbow lorikeets wheeled and screeched and Joyce whistled at them. Felix sat up.

‘Sorry, love,’ she called from the doorway. ‘They make a bloody racket!’

‘No, it’s nice.’

Joyce grinned. ‘We’re having a heart attack breakfast. Eggs, bacon, sausage and fried bread.’

Felix laughed, bleary and thick-tongued from the quantity of wine. ‘Not the sort to mope, are you?’

‘Nup. Some would say thick-skinned.’

‘Only to your face.’

‘Don’t be cheeky. Now come and eat.’

He wrapped himself in one of the nasty blankets and joined her and they ate, then threw the bacon rind to the kookaburra sitting on the chicken wire fence below.

She suggested a boat trip before he left, so they went, shoes in hand, down to the little jetty and Joyce fired up the little two stroke motor on the aluminium boat she called her ‘tinny’. Once they were clear of the shallows, she let out the throttle and they hummed along. Felix leaned into the wind. Salt spray caught him full in the face and he felt exhilarated.

He shouted over to Joyce. ‘It’s bloody beautiful.’

‘See? I promised you.’ Joyce’s face was full of happiness.

She pointed out Tennis Wharf and a little kindergarten, and then they skirted into the middle of the channel between the island and the onshore bays, out past Toweler’s Beach until Lion Island hulked before them.
She let the engine idle then and they enjoyed the bobbing quiet for a minute or two.

‘Come back and stay again. You need to see the letters. You’re not going home yet, are you? England, I mean.’

Home. The word gave him a jolt. ‘No. I’d like to come back here to see you again.’

She squinted across at him, the wind fussing her hair. ‘Then give me a call when you’ve read the transcript.’

He thought about the sheets of paper in his bag.

She turned the boat in the direction of the mainland and soon pulled up alongside the Church Point wharf. He climbed out as the ferry came chugging in behind them, tooting his horn to hurry them along.

‘Keep your hair on, Mike,’ Joyce shouted, pulling her boat away.

Felix trudged back to the car, thinking about Jozef as a young man. Jozef in love — that was quite an idea. He thought about Felicity. When he reached the hire car, he saw that it was missing all four hubcaps.

He let himself into the drivers’ side door and slid into the seat. Then he pulled the pile of papers, Transcript: interview with Jozef Fabin, from his backpack.
Chapter 15

Well, thought Daniel, how one is brought low by the inevitable failure of one’s body. He lowered himself into the chair in the waiting room of his doctor’s Paddington surgery then settled in for the wait. He hadn’t told his gallery staff he was visiting the doctor. Why tell them? He loathed being the object of sympathy. It was always better to invent some important meeting to explain an absence. Keep them guessing.

After five minutes in the crowded waiting room, his eyes began to close. The place was a little overheated. But he remained erect, spine straight as a line. He folded his hands in his lap, opening his eyes a fraction to glance down at them through hooded lids. They were the oldest looking part of him, brown and big-knuckled, buggered by arthritis and bent into unnatural angles. You’ve had the worst of it, he silently told his hands. He remembered Valerie’s hands, the turpentine-hardened skin and the bitten down nails. Lately he found his thoughts drifted backwards. He hated the idea of becoming the old idiot who clings to his past. But it was no good: he couldn’t help the process of reflection. Images would appear to him — like Valerie’s hands just now — randomly and without warning. Some were memories but not all; he suspected himself of invention, elaboration. Even the true memories, he noticed, tended to acquire a richness over time. A patina. The content was revised and embellished, little by little, and the telling improved from constant rehearsal. Were Valerie’s hands really quite so shabby? Who could say? The past is equal parts fact, longing and wistful interpretation. Lena doesn’t know that yet, he thought. She’s still suspicious of her own past. Running from it, in fact. That changes over time.
I’ll tell her one day, he decided, that embellishments make the past kinder. He remembered mainly fine, warm days with Valerie, for instance. Winters had almost disappeared from his repertoire of romantic recollections, along with the dull days spent waiting for her to sober up, the in-between times when they avoided arguments but lived half in their own heads. He remembered Valerie’s fashionable friends with fondness although they were a difficult, squabbling lot, always holding grudges and cold-shouldering each other for some imagined slight or another.

He shifted in the chair. His back was getting stiff. He felt on the verge of a sudden attack of irascibility. Black moods came on him with increasing frequency these days. He imagined that the exhaustive trawling of the past was the cause. Sometime he felt a private and violent disgust, as if he had gone too far, travelled back to the moment of his own birth.

There were gaps, of course. Who didn’t have gaps?

It was clear that Valerie somehow held the key to these black parts of his mind, although he dared not imagine how. He shuddered, now, to think how his own psyche had acquired such grossly Freudian flaws.

Doctor can you help me? I’m unwinding, he thought.

He coughed and focused on the vile pastel landscape print on the wall. Bad art empties the mind, he thought. Ah, bliss.

He took his keys from his top pocket and turned them over in his hand. There were gallery keys, to the front door and storeroom. House keys, including an electronic gate key, which hardly ever worked. There were also some elegant old skeleton keys, given to him by a Tasmanian farmer on a buying trip a decade ago. Gaoler’s keys, he had told Daniel. Daniel had always loved the feel of these
long iron fingers. Over there years, they’d become a sort of talisman. The prosperous farmer, it turned out, was educated about art. It had been a very productive trip out to Saint Helens that day. The farmer had shown him the small family collection: a couple of Charles Blackman figurative canvases and a small set of Dickerson prints. They talked about the drought and drank local beer on the bonnet of Daniel’s hire car as the sun went down. Daniel had been sorry to leave but happy for the set of prints, which would sell in Sydney for a handsome profit.

Ten years ago. These days Andrew did all the buying trips and they hardly ever involved setting foot in peoples’ homes. He missed all that.

Daniel crossed and uncrossed his legs. All the expensive private health cover in the world can’t guarantee your doctor will run on time, he thought crossly. He reminded himself to bring the biography book up with Lena properly, at the first opportunity. He felt ready for a final creation. He would talk about art and artists — he would like to articulate his thoughts, this time, on the clairvoyance of brilliant artists and their ability to see right to the heart of a thing. He saw the true artist’s ability to say things in other people’s voices, to represent what was on other peoples’ minds, as a kind of ventriloquism.

He would reveal to Lena his true belief that art came from breakage; that it erupted via a fault line, widened a fissure in consciousness. Art made people unsound, he believed. It rendered them unfit for anything else. Without this theory, how could he explain the appalling behaviour of his beloved?

At last, the doctor came into the room and called his name. Daniel rose to his feet and waited a moment for the blood to return to his head, then followed the young man to the surgery door.
Forty-five minutes later, he stood on the curb of the footpath, the sun on his back and his feet overhanging the edge. If he were to pitch forward, he could tumble into the street into the path of a passing car. Bang, like that.

He smiled. Foolish, risky things amused him. My days are full of small adventures like this, he thought. Being an idiot when no-one is watching. One keeps one’s sense of independence somehow.

The doctor delivered the bad news with suitable gravitas. That flutter in his chest was, as he suspected, likely to kill him. The final movement of his life’s sonata: staccato. The young doctor leant against his table, attempting to appear informal. The paper in his hand trembled slightly.

‘You mean just like that?’ Daniel snapped his fingers to illustrate the point.

He watched the doctor’s mouth as he struggled with the difficult task of delivering the prognosis.

‘Can’t really say, to be honest. Could be. You need to have more tests. Probably need an arterial stent too.’

Daniel laughed.

‘I’m sorry, but that’s the jackpot, isn’t it? A long life and a sudden end? No protracted illness, no burdensome lingering between the worlds.’

The doctor smiled, apparently relieved at his patient’s redoubtable show of spirit.

‘Well, plenty of people prefer a slow goodbye.’

‘Not me.’

The doctor shook his hand and pressed the folded sheet of paper into it.
‘Then good luck. I’ve booked you in for an angiogram at St Vincent’s tomorrow.’

But as Daniel stood there on the curb, the dullness of his future life — his stent-prolonged, heart-disabled life — took shape in his head. As his health worsened, the possibilities of his life would presumably contract. Perhaps the doctors would forbid him to ever have another game of golf. Perhaps he had enjoyed his last sexual adventure. Likely as not he would not be allowed on a plane. He might never again leave Australia, never even leave Sydney. He thought about New York with a faint longing.

Reluctantly, he took a step back from the road and waited for a taxi to appear. But he made up his mind: there would be no angiogram, no hospital, no stent.

‘New York. That’s where everyone’s going,’ Valerie said. It was 1960.

New York was the centre of the art world; at least, that was what she believed. An artist must go there, she told him, to be worthy of any serious consideration. She’d built the visit to New York up in her imagination to be a sort of pilgrimage, an artist’s initiation. She would meet her hero, Mark Rothko. She would travel out the Long Island Rail Road to visit the grave of the Rosenbergs at Pine Lawn. She would show her drawings in a gallery; start small, gain a little notice. If she and Daniel could settle somewhere, she would paint. She was a restless worker in those days, she’d paint for days at a time but when Daniel asked to see the work, he was often rebuffed. Her studio was out of bounds.
His twenty-ninth birthday party that year was also their farewell. They were booked to travel by ship the next day. Flying was out of the question: Valerie had nightmares about air crashes and found confined spaces distressing. The sea would inspire her, she said. Daniel didn’t object. He worried about her night and day by then.

She took pills. He didn’t discourage it. The doctors believed she was too delicate for the responsibilities of adult life so Frank had set up a limited trust fund and she was allowed to spend it as she liked. She was permitted, Daniel saw, an extended adolescence. She had them all terrified of a repeat of the worst time, around her sixteenth birthday, the time she had ended up in the Callan Park psychiatric hospital.

But he knew that money was never enough. Looking back, Daniel saw that love wasn’t enough, either. She wanted blood — a lifetime’s devotion, a kind of selfless servitude.

At their farewell party in her parent’s smart house, she drank a bottle of champagne and proceeded to abuse Charles Danford, the art critic for The Bulletin, for ignoring women artists. Daniel steered her away, into the arms of her mother who put her to bed. Afterwards, he silently stepped out the front door into the Kirribilli street alone and looked up into the navy night sky. His own terror was enough to nearly overwhelm him.

He saw he would never be enough for her. But he wanted nothing else.

Mark Rothko was touring Europe when they reached New York. Rothko didn’t respond to her letters; she took it very badly. That was when she’d first suggested they fake a painting. A Rothko, who else? He deserves it, she said — and what could be easier? They could make it in one of the lofts in Soho,
someone would give them space. Daniel could fake the documents. He’d know what to say about authenticity and provenance.

He refused. A month later, when they ran out of money and were forced to book an early return passage home, he gave in. He was in the habit of giving in, by then. They couldn’t sell the fake Rothko. They wrapped the canvas in old fabric off-cuts from the denim factory and left for the boat, their rent unpaid.

The taxi failed to arrive so Daniel started to walk. It took some effort and he was acutely aware of the labouring of his heart. The winter sun caught him squarely in the eyes. He squinted and Valerie’s face appeared in his mind — another image, unbidden — and that uncomfortable feeling came over him, that sense of having stirred up something primal and disgusting. Saliva pooled in his mouth and he was forced to stop and spit.

Words rang in his head. *I can see you*, Valerie said. *I know you.*

He hauled himself upright and marched on, slowly, the arthritic pain in his back and legs slowing him down. The nausea rose in him again. Must he always look back? His half-dead heart pounded in his chest.

The face remained, the voice echoed: *I know you.* Valerie smiled, black hair around her face just like in the photos. *Underneath it all you’re a savage, Daniel. A killer. A murderer.*

It’s a trick, he told himself breathlessly. Put it out of your mind.

At last, he caught the attention of a passing taxi.
Chapter 16

Gabriel sat behind the desk in his cramped office, his attention focused on his computer screen. Lena sat opposite, studying her friend’s face. Today he looked as beautiful as a wax statue, clear skinned and sleek-haired. How did he do it?

She glanced around at the walls of the little plasterboard cell, hastily erected in the corner of the open plan office to demonstrate to the other staff that Gabriel had earned a promotion and now managed a research stream.

He spoke to her without lifting his gaze from the computer screen.

‘Lena, if the gallery’s bent it’s not your problem. You don’t need that kind of trouble. Stay away.’

She leant in, her eyes wide with mischief. Impatience was making her fidgety. Heck, it used to be easy to get a rise out of him.

‘Aren’t you curious about what they’re hiding?’

‘Nope.’

He peered at his computer screen while Lena swung in the swivel chair.

‘But I saw it with my own eyes, as they say. These little boxes appeared and then disappeared, all hush-hush. That Andrew. He’s a sly dog.’

‘You’re exaggerating.’

‘Stop being such a story-killer. He’s moving something dodgy.’

‘So what sort of thing?’ At last he looked up. Behind his wire-rimmed glasses, his black eyes narrowed.

Lena giggled and leant forward. ‘Must be some kind of artistic contraband. Garden gnomes. Slacks with elastic waistbands. Or those pictures you get in restaurants, the ones with the moving waterfalls.’

He laughed quietly and looked up. ‘How do they work, those pictures?’
She had him. ‘Fuck knows.’

They both giggled and Lena felt the knot of tension in her stomach loosen.

He stretched his arms above his head, revealing the sweat patches under the arms of his stripy cotton shirt.

‘Well, you’ll have to figure it out alone I’m afraid,’ he said. ‘We’re going away, remember?’ Gabriel leant back in his chair. ‘Hunter Valley weekend mini-break.’

‘Mini-break? Tell me you didn’t actually just use that word.’

‘Don’t be smug.’

‘And you’re not?’

He rubbed his face. ‘I’m tired Lena.’

‘It’s six o’clock. Can’t you leave?’ Lena reached for her wallet. ‘I’ll get coffees.’

‘No, you should go. I’ve got to finish this grant application by tomorrow.’ He leant back over the desk and pushed the glasses back onto the bridge of his nose. ‘Call me.’

She kept the disappointment out of her voice. ‘Sure.’

She hoisted herself out of the swivel chair. Happy birthday for yesterday. Gee thanks.

She took the lift back down to the street thinking glumly that things always seemed to go bad when she didn’t have Gabriel by her side.

When Gabriel graduated from school, leaving her to finish year 11 and 12 alone, she went off the rails completely. She stayed in the art room and tried to avoid the girls who terrorised everyone but without him she had few allies. She
was teased about her scar. Her locker was broken into and her files were stamped on.

She started playing truant, taking whole afternoons off and travelling into town on the bus. It felt good, to sit at the back of the bus on that slow ride along the beaches to Wynyard.

In town she stole things, recklessly. She would hit the Pitt Street mall and Gowings then move on to the smaller arcades. Some days she came home with bags of things she didn’t even remember taking. She’d stuff the junk under the bed. But she could barely look at it. She’d get sweaty and dizzy if she tried.

She never felt anxious when she took things. When she was stealing she was strangely light. She found it easy. She floated around the shops like she wasn’t even breathing the same air as everyone else. In the moment, she felt invisible and clever. Undetectable. It was afterwards, when she took out each stolen item piece by piece and held them in her hands, that she felt so scared she almost made herself sick.

She didn’t even want the stuff.

She was caught, of course. The plain-clothes security guard in the Coles supermarket at Town Hall must have followed her for ten whole minutes before stepping in her path as she made for the door. By then she had a bag full: a new pencil case, some underwear, nail polish and an eyeliner. Then he found frozen macaroni cheese, some biscuits and tea bags. She thought she saw something like regret in his eyes when he handed her over to the police officer.

The officer took her to the Surry Hills police station and she was forced to sit in a room while they tried, over and over, to call her mum. But by eight
o’clock Cristina still hadn’t come so a policewoman drove her home as she cried quietly in the passenger seat.

The officer pulled the patrol car over under a streetlight outside the block of flats where Lena and Cristina lived.

‘We’ve been here a year,’ Lena said flatly. ‘A year in the same place — gotta be a record.’

The policewoman turned to face Lena. ‘Look, you’ll have to go to the Children’s Court.’

Lena’s head ached; she could barely understand. ‘What?’

‘Do you understand? I need to talk to your mum. You’ve been charged.’

But she was crying so hard she couldn’t talk. The glare from the streetlamp hurt her tired, sore eyes. I’m one of the good kids, she’d wanted to say. Not tough and mean like those girls at school.

The policewoman sighed. Suddenly Cristina was at the passenger’s side window, banging and shouting. Next thing she knew, Lena was being dragged out of the car. Cristina had her by the hair. Under the light they must have looked like a pair of scrapping blonde kids.

‘What have you done?’ Cristina screeched.

The police officer leapt out of the car and was on the grass verge in a second, trying to free Lena from her mother’s grip. Cristina’s allegiances twisted on their drunken axis.

In the end, it was Lena who took charge; she gripped her mother’s shoulder and turned her around, marched her towards the steps to their flat. The police officer watched them go and Lena felt pity for her. Cristina was still swearing as they lurched up the concrete steps.
Later that night Lena curled on her bed under the window and felt overwhelmed with shame and fear. Social services were coming for her. This time they were going to take her away for good.

Now she put Gabriel out of her mind and walked to the bus stop. She caught the bus as far as Bondi Junction. Cristina had declared a birthday truce and was bringing Artie around, which meant Lena would have to cook. She stopped at the fruit shop and bought galangal and lemongrass. She planned to make her favourite Thai fish curry.

Back at her tiny flat, she dawdled as she waited for her guests. Her cat came in the back door and leapt onto the sofa. Lena flopped onto the couch and pulled the cat into her lap. As Lena rubbed Magpie’s black neck, the cat’s fur stood on end. Lena knew that they were to expect some cold days; she had noticed a true chill in the air these last few nights. Last night, below the garden, she’d heard the big waves crashing on the rocks.

She looked around at the clutter in her flat. It was a perfect summer home. But in winter the old house collaborated with the elements, letting in the wind and harbouring the misty sea vapours on cold nights. She had to tape over the cracks in the floorboards and seal up the old windows to keep out the draughts. Sometimes she imagined the whole house slipping down the rockface, brick and board. She and Magpie and all of the rest of them, waking in the sea.

The fish curry bubbled on the stove and she got up wearily to turn it down. She looked at the clock: 8.15 — Cristina and Artie were late. She pulled on a thick woollen jacket and went out the back door and stood on the lawn for five long minutes, watching low clouds race across the sky, obscuring the stars.
high above. It was beautiful: there was moonlight over the water tonight and silver streaks in the clouds but her enjoyment of it was marred by a sense of apprehension.

The phone rang inside, snapping her out of her trance. She hurried back in and picked up.

‘Yep?’

‘Lena? It’s Artie.’

‘Where are you?’

‘Listen, we’ll have to take a raincheck.’

She hung up before he had a chance to explain. Cristina was probably passed out on the floor of their Newtown rathole.

She ate a spoonful of the curry standing at the sink but it stuck to the roof her mouth and her stomach constricted. She opened the back door of the flat and put the saucepan on the mat. Let Magpie have it, or the mynah birds that swooped her on the path. She methodically brushed her teeth, put on her pyjamas and climbed into bed.

She lay, tired and furious, with the moon pouring in the window and the sea shifting and tossing outside. A hard fist of hate clenched her stomach.
Chapter 17

Yasir shook his head, frowning. Why leave a pot of food? Was the pale girl mad? He watched her from the garden bed, from his hidden surveillance spot beneath the camellia tree. He saw the look of irritation on her face when she’d heard the phone ring inside the flat. He watched the lights inside the flat go dark and had imagined her performing her bedtime toilette. It made him blush. He shouldn’t be doing this.

But now he felt concern. He knew a mad girl when he was at university, a girl who wouldn’t eat. In the end her family put her in hospital and the doctors fed her through tubes. Her poor body was a husk by then and her face was covered in terrible, fine hairs. What was that girl’s name again? Had she lived or died? He scratched his beard, wondering.

The pale girl had been so close he could hear her breathing. Her hair shone in the moonlight. She was staring at the sky too, staring as if she was looking for an answer to some distressing question — the way he himself had sometimes stared. The big jacket she wore made her legs look thin.

Belinda. That was the name of the starving girl. After an extended absence, part of it spent in hospital, she returned to Cambridge. She hurried to and from her classes on legs like straws but she never lost the air of self-hatred that made her repellent to the other students. Sometime mid-way through their second year, he lost track of her. Who knows what became of her. She had struck him as a person with a distinctive and recognisable will to die.

Which in itself is appalling, he thought. And not as rare as one might wish to think.
He smiled to himself. What would his clever wife Farah have made of all this? Lurking in bushes, staring at girls. If she were alive to see him now, how quick she’d be to slap his cheek!

She would say: *I won’t even look at you until you’ve had a shave and done something sensible with your hair.*

Then she’d look at him with that look that said she loved him fiercely.

*Are you out of your simple mind? You’re a poet, not a stalker,* she’d say. *For pity’s sake. Don’t make a bad situation worse.*

He waited a minute or two in the velvety darkness then crept up the path and lifted the pan and sniffed at it deeply. The food smelt rich and wonderful. He rubbed his fingertips on his clothes in an attempt to clean them, then scooped the food up with his fingers and ate it silently and quickly, giving thanks. The chilli burn reached the back of his throat. It was thrilling and familiar. The sauce was sweet and salty and the fish fell apart on his tongue. He lost all decorum then, and crammed the food into his mouth.

He ate until there was nothing left, then wiped his hands on his pants and looked at the pot. His stomach felt uncomfortable already; it was time to lie in the cave, bear-like.

He rummaged in his coat pocket and took out a piece of green glass, washed into a smooth disc by the waves. He rubbed his thumb over its edges, enjoying its curves, before placing it into the pot. He’d found it today, over by the cave. He interpreted it as another sign from the snake in the rock; a sign that things were moving in the right direction. Now he could share the snake’s blessing with the girl.
He placed the pot gently on the mat then crept back down the path, down through the garden to his home in the rock wall.

Back at his rock ledge, he sat with his back propped against the smooth curve of sandstone. There was silver over the sea tonight, spilling out of the clouds and over the water in broken lines. The lights of the big steamers winked on the horizon and he made a rectangle from his fingers, cutting them from the picture, so he could imagine he was seeing the land before modern invasion. He imagined the Aboriginal hunter, the snake man, was by his side.

He’d learned about the Aboriginal people and the journey of the whales when he was in the detention centre. The teacher was a small woman with short, bristly hair and spectacles. He remembered how horrible her Australian accent had seemed to him then.

He placed his hands in his lap. Out to sea, steamers crossed the middle of the horizon. The pale girl in the garden flat above reminded him of his wife, of course. Farah, the smartest girl he’d ever met. He saw flashes of her in the pale girl’s movements. In a gesture; in something carved in the air with a pair of hands.

He stood and stretched his stiff knees then climbed into his cave and lay down. Many cruel things have happened, he thought. But the first and worst was Farah dying. That was when everything had started to go wrong.

But now — he stopped himself. Did he dare say it? He felt different, these last few days. He felt himself emerging from the fog of recent months. Most days he woke sore and hungry but without the heavy feeling that had shadowed him for so long.

Perhaps he had truly walked himself sane. Did he dare to even think it?
He sat up and banged his head violently on the ceiling of the cave, then fell back, suddenly.

Well. That’ll teach me to get ahead of myself, he thought.
Chapter 18

Felix perched on the edge of the bed in his hotel room, the transcribed pages of his father’s interview clutched in his hand.

JF: ‘In the winter of 1944 to 45, after my parents died, my brother Danek and I escaped the labour farm and went begging from farm to farm. Some people were kind to us. At the end we stayed in a barn. It may have been near Köln.’

Interviewer: ‘Yes?’

JF: ‘The sky was full of planes. We could hear the Allied troops on the other side of the river. Every day, there were new bombs, new fires.’

Interviewer: ‘The Rhine, you mean?’

JF: ‘I suppose. I was small, I didn’t know.’

Interviewer: ‘And what happened in the barn?’

JF: ‘A gang of boys found us. They were boy soldiers running away from fighting on the German side. They were very frightened and angry.’

Interviewer: ‘Were they armed?’

JF: ‘Yes, they had bits and pieces of uniform too. Little boys in big trousers. Of course, you wore whatever you could get your hands on.’

Interviewer: ‘They found your hiding place?’

JF: ‘Yes. They shot my brother. Bang, like that. In the head.’

Interviewer: ‘Then what happened?’

JF: ‘I heard them leave so I came out — I jumped — out of my hiding place in the rafters. But I should have waited. I came face to face with one of the boys. He shouted at me in German. Then he knew a little Polish so he shouted at
me in Polish. I thought he was going to kill me. But he told me to show him where my brother kept his papers.’

Interviewer: ‘What papers?’

JF: ‘His identity papers. They were inside Danek’s jacket, stitched in by our mother I expect. I don’t remember.’

Interviewer: ‘And then?’

JF: ‘Then he told me I had a new brother now. He would become Danek Fabin.’

Felix threw the bundle to the carpet and picked up the phone to call Joyce.

‘Well?’ She asked. ‘How’re you feeling?’

‘Bludgeoned. A headache bigger than the world debt.’

‘Go to bed. It’s late.’

‘Can I come back to the island?’

‘Get yourself to bed. Come up the day after next. I’ve got things on tomorrow.’

‘Right. Ok.’

He said goodbye and threw the phone on the bed then paced to the window and back, his head throbbing. He rummaged in his bag for painkillers and hastily swallowed the pills. The hotel air conditioning hummed in the background.

He sensed he was being managed by Joyce. Yet he was grateful that she cared enough to be concerned.
He lay down and tried to put his father’s words about the boy in the barn out of his mind but they came flying back: he told me I had a new brother now. He would be Danek Fabin. Around and around they went.

But the ache in his head meant there was only one course of action for now: lie still, wait for the migraine to pass.

The first time he’d had a migraine, he was eleven and he’d thought, quite simply, that he was going to die. The flickering lights before his eyes were terrifying and the pain was the worst he’d ever experienced. It seemed so unfair that he hadn’t even seen a girl’s boobs except Bernadette’s by accident, or even gone into town on the bus properly by himself. His brain was exploding and he was going to die. Salil sat with him in the sick bay at school until Jozef came to collect him and grimly gave his diagnosis.

‘It won’t kill you, Daniel,’ Jozef had said. ‘I ought to know, I’ve had them too.’

Salil jiggled with excitement on the chair by the bed. ‘Did you know that when your heart stops, there’s still electricity in your brain for a bit longer so your brain’s still awake but you don’t even know you’re actually dead yet?’

Jozef shushed him. ‘Salil, he’s not dying. He just feels like he is.’

A black minute passed while Jozef spoke to the nurse and Felix listened to the faraway murmurs. Then, when Jozef returned, Felix heard Salil whisper to his father:

‘But Mr Fabin, what does a brain feel like?’

This time, Felix had ignored all the warning signs — the flashing lights on the edge of his vision, the sick feeling. He’d stayed too long at the cramped hotel room desk, reading the transcript over and over. He knew it was foolish to
keep going. But he felt he had begun to understand something fundamental about
Jozef.

He knew that Jozef had been brought to England alone. He knew the
Chisholm family had loved him properly and had put him back together, piece by
piece. But the things Jozef witnessed in wartime were never talked about, as far
as Felix knew. The family probably hoped that Jozef was young enough to forget
his experiences.

But now Felix recognised that it must have been a sheer act of will for his
father to see good in anyone, when he’d seen such evil at close hand. He saw the
determination in his father that made the man unique. He also saw something
that disturbed him. The boy in the barn was a creature of war — created, like a
mythic golem, a monster, out of the mud of trauma and desperation to survive.

Vigilant, fastidious Jozef had taught his son that every day, in every small
act, you reveal to the world who you are and what you represent. One should be
principled, unswerving, dignified. If you thought about it, the boy in the barn was
everything Jozef abhorred. No wonder he wanted to find him.

What had Jozef planned to do to the man, when he found him?

Soon thinking became difficult: the pain was much as he could bear. He
lay completely still in the half-light and waited for the migraine to pass.
Chapter 19

The bus dropped Cristina at the corner of Bondi Road. Resting the bottom edge of a large rectangular canvas on the pavement for a moment, she admired the curved bay of Bondi Beach. Today it was flat as a lake.

She missed the beach. Newtown made her feel too old, like she had been parachuted into a community of hipsters in some reality TV experiment. People were watching, waiting for her to fuck up. Lena, especially.

She lifted the framed canvas from the pavement and crossed the street. She had planned her sly visit to Lena’s flat. She wanted her daughter to come home to a surprise, which meant taking the canvas to the flat while Lena was at work. She’d hauled herself out of bed before eight and lugged the canvas to the Newtown train station without any help from Artie. And hadn’t he begged to be allowed to help? Artie was a big, soft man. A born helper. She was really lucky to have him — another reason not to screw it all up.

Still, all the way from Newtown to Bondi on public transport by myself, with this monster. Quite an effort, she thought to herself proudly.

She walked the distance to Lena’s flat with her jumper tied around her waist, sweating. This sun in mid-winter, you’d hardly credit it! The pine frame was light enough but she’d made the damn thing so wide — the bigger the better, she’d thought — it was as big as the span of her arms.

She rested against Lena’s front gate. She’d made frames and stretched canvases for Lena when her girl was at art school. Back when Lena was painting every day. This time, it felt good to spend half her sickness benefits on a good-sized pre-stretched one at the Spotlight store on the Princes Highway. It was a make-up present. To show Lena she wasn’t all bad.
She edged the frame sideways down the path, past the bins, the bikes, the long-ago pot plants gone to seed and the eight little mail boxes, for the four flats in each house. When she arrived at the door, she found Magpie sitting patiently on the doormat beside a dirty saucepan. The cat looked up at Cristina through narrowed eyes and miaowed, stretching ostentatiously. Cristina let herself in with her old key and smelled the faint aroma of spices. She felt her stomach drop to her knees and almost lost her nerve then, when she imagined the dinner gone bad and Lena wearing that hard face she saved just for her mother’s moments of failure.

But she forced herself forward into the dark little room, half dragging the huge canvas in her aching arms.

She looked around, shaking her head. She’d forgotten what an Aladdin’s cave this place was. So full of junk, if there was a fire — well, never mind. God, how had the two of them managed, cooped up in so little space?

Still, she thought, it wasn’t as if I did anything much, during those months: just went to my meetings. She couldn’t even remember what started that last awful binge. It could have been anything: God knows, it didn’t take much.

She’d mostly just watched the sea, during those long days spent living on her daughter’s charity, wondering if her own landlord, Ken, over in Chippendale, would ever give her things back or just rent her place out as furnished. Arsehole. She never went back to find out. Never got her stuff.

There were no squinty photos of Lena when she was a kid; no school reports or kindergarten finger paintings. No locks of baby hair — though Lena’s hair was still as blonde as it had been when she was tiny.
Wait, she corrected herself hurriedly. Her drinking had caused her bigger regrets than that. The image of Lena’s poor gashed shoulder made her shudder.

Oh, fuck, she thought, what kind of a mother am I?

She walked to the door and turned back to look at the canvas one last time. Lena would see it as soon as she walked in. Maybe it’d get her painting again.

Cristina let herself out and locked the door. She pocketed the key thinking that Lena would soon ask for it back. Magpie eyed her from the fence. Cristina hissed at the cat and made her way quickly back up the path to the road.
Chapter 20

Lena stopped at the gate of the Paddington park and looked around. It was hardly more than a postage stamp of grass and a hedge border. She pushed open the iron gate and walked up the path to the wooden park bench, feeling slightly self-conscious. The windows of a half dozen pretty terraces peered down at her. You’d expect twitching curtains on a posh street like this, she thought.

She unwrapped her salad roll and bit the end with caution but the beetroot slid out into the paper wrapping and soon it had disgorged tomato slices and shredded lettuce into the paper in her lap. She stood up and let the detritus fall onto the path. It was 2 pm already and Paul Collier, the young artist whose triptych she had admired with Daniel in the gallery storeroom, was due at the gallery any minute.

Daniel had given the boy a solo show. Lena’s job was to prepare his exhibition notes — and to prepare him. He’ll need a bit of chivvying along, Daniel said. She frowned as her mind came to rest on the subject of Daniel. She wanted to ask him about that consignment of mysterious boxes that came and went. How should she phrase it? *Just out of curiosity. So I can do my job properly next time.* It was hard to lie to Daniel.

Eventually, she gave up on the roll, brushed crumbs from her skirt and got to her feet with Daniel’s voice in her head: *all you need is love. And art. And love of art.*

I’ll bet he never went hungry, she thought ruefully. He could talk his way into a free lunch, even now. She walked quickly out the gate and back around the corner to the gallery.
When she stepped in the gallery door, she found Andrew at her desk with the telephone pressed to his ear, scribbling notes. Then, as she turned to hang her jacket on the back of her chair, she saw a young man in a business suit park his Postie bike at the bottom of the stairs and vault them two at a time. She smiled to herself and stepped forward.

‘Paul?’

‘How did you know?’ he asked breathlessly. He seemed to be in a state of perpetual motion; hands rubbing on trousers, weight shifting from foot to foot, ponytail swinging, wide eyes shifting left-right-left.

‘We were expecting you.’

I just knew you’d be like this, she thought: wild as wind.

She took him through to the back of the gallery and made him coffee.

‘Right. Let’s talk program notes,’ she said brightly.

Later, when she had shown Paul Collier out, she went back to the hallway to study the photograph of Daniel and Valerie on the wall. She wanted to put Paul out of her mind, to release her jangling nerves.

She peered at the photo and remembered where she’d seen the picture before: it was from the newspaper social pages but it had been reproduced, in miniature, in Daniel’s book. The picture was taken in 1961 or 1962; Daniel was wearing a dinner jacket and bow tie. Valerie wore a tiny tailored jacket over a dress with a short skirt and an expression that Lena found unnerving. The eyes were open wide, the head thrown back in a laugh that might have been immoderately loud. Lena knew that look well.
She imagined what Daniel would say about them, captured like this. According to the stories, things went downhill for Valerie around this time. But things had never changed for Daniel, she thought. His love remained ardent. Odd that someone could be so fixed.

She realised, suddenly, that she’d hit on something faintly disturbing about Daniel. Time had, indeed, stopped for him. He was fixed in a kind of rapture — in a false present. She frowned to herself, unsettled by the thought.

She walked slowly down the hallway towards the back offices. She paused at Andrew’s door. She meant to tell him she would leave soon; that the meeting with Paul had gone well.

As she walked in, Andrew looked up. He was hunched forward over the desk, poised to inhale two fat powder lines, neatly arranged on one of the little blue kitchen plates.

He blinked at her. A rolled up fifty dollar note slipped from his hand and onto the floor.

‘Lena,’ he said dully, as he straightened up. ‘What a wonderful surprise.’
Chapter 21

Daniel Faber was tired of art. That’s what he told himself, anyway, as he made his way slowly across the expanse of the modern Australian paintings room in the Art Gallery of NSW.

Of course, he knew a lot of the art in the room. He’d picked up some of the artists represented here when they were so poor they’d stolen toilet rolls from the St Vinnies Hospital emergency ward. Had known them when they were hungry enough to swap a painting for a meal.

But who could be bothered looking at art on walls these days? He refused to look at art on walls. His eyes were tired of it, his heart couldn’t stand it. Besides, he said to himself, some of this stuff is absolutely loathsome. Really.

But there you have it, he thought, pausing to let his heart catch up. A case in point. I was wrong about so many things and here are ten, twenty fine examples. People enjoy looking at them. Who am I to judge?

He leant on his walking stick and started moving again. His goal was the fine leather couch in front of the Dickerson landscape. You should be ashamed of yourself, he thought. Turning into one of those vile curmudgeons that no-one dare have a conversation with. So opinionated that everyone laughs behind your back. Art is for the young.

But he knew he didn’t care.

He reached the leather couch at last and lowered himself slowly, listening to the percussion of his stupid heart.

A school group came through, ushered in by a teacher issuing instructions. The kids were primary school age, eight or nine, and the group seemed to roll into the space like a giant organism — calling, swinging bags, the
core ones serious, the stragglers orbiting the rank and file. He watched a red
haired girl trail behind the rest. She frowned up at a Drysdale on the wall. She
backed out, still staring at the painting, then ran to catch her friends.

Already a critic, he thought. For goodness sake.

He sat for a further five minutes, checking his watch twice in that period,
before Alison Grove, a curator, came through the gallery, clipboard in hand. My
goodness, looking older, he thought. He’d met her when she was no more than
thirty. Now he noted the smart suit and stockings. Seconds later, her glance
swept to take in the room and she noticed Daniel there on the chair.

‘Daniel! How nice.’

‘Alison, indeed.’ He forced the pleasantries out.

‘What a treat. Can I help you with anything?’

She wants my paintings, he thought. ‘No, goodness no. Just meeting a
friend.’

Her eyebrows shot up. My reputation precedes me, he thought: grumpy,
old and friendless.

‘Well. Enjoy.’ She smiled, although it looked more like a wince.

He returned her half-smile. ‘I’ll let you get back to work.’

Jeremy King, his accountant, appeared across the room at last. The
younger man sat down on the bench and winced. ‘My golf knee.’

Daniel smiled faintly. ‘You should try using use a club instead.’

‘Ha ha. Dining out when you could eat at home?’

‘Don’t be vulgar. Just wanted somewhere private.’

Jeremy’s eyebrows rose. ‘Right. Who don’t you trust at your gallery?’

‘Don’t be ridiculous. You know I don’t trust anyone.’
They both laughed.

Jeremy gave Daniel a regretful look. ‘I can’t stay, sorry. Big day. What’s the special request?’

Daniel slid a cardboard folder across the black couch towards him. Jeremy opened it and read the front page then, after a moment, closed it again and looked over at Daniel.

‘Andrew won’t notice?’

‘God no. He’s preoccupied.’ Daniel tapped the side of his nose.

‘Oh.’ Jeremy nodded.

‘Yes. Besides that, he’s a damn fool.’

Jeremy frowned. ‘Well. I’ll delay reporting, but you’ll only have a few weeks before the quarterly statements go out. Then you’ll have to explain yourself.’

Daniel squeezed his old friend’s arm. ‘Thank you.’

‘It’s a lot to give away.’

‘Who gives a shit?’

‘You’re a complicated man, Daniel Faber. I could almost believe you love the world.’

‘Ha. Forget it. Why leave a fortune to the money-grubbing lawyers?’

He let Jeremy help him to his feet but urged the younger man to go on. Then he retraced his steps back to the carpark, through the international modern art gallery, and this time he permitted himself to look at the artwork.

But he was stopped in his tracks. From twenty paces away, he could have sworn the painting on the wall was the fake Rothko he and Valerie created in Manhattan all those years ago. His knees almost buckled from the shock and he
wondered if his heart would give out now — here, of all places. He managed to force himself closer.

It was not the ill-fated New York fake. He turned dizzily and walked to his car, longing for a cigarette even though he hadn’t smoked for more than forty years.

When, he thought, will she leave me alone?
Chapter 22

Yasir dragged the tarpaulin across the rock ledge towards his camp, then paused to wipe the sweat from his eyes. It was thirsty work; soon he’d have to take a break and pay a visit to the water tap down on the boardwalk. He frowned and aimed an arc of spit over the ledge and onto the rocks below. He hated to go down to the beachfront in daylight. People stared — of course they stared, who could blame them? Sometimes, when he felt a half dozen pairs of eyes on his back, the anxiety rose up in him and fixed him to the spot, his mouth parched and his arms pinned to his sides, the breath knocked clean out of him.

He dragged the tarpaulin behind him as he climbed to the overhanging sandstone roof — the top lip — of the wide, shallow cave mouth. Then he attempted to drape the tarp over the top of it, shaking out its loose folds.

He ran his fingertips over its waxy plastic surface. It was ripped in several places. He’d found it by the side of the road up on Wellington Street, where he’d been pacing this morning in the dark, trying to keep warm. A man could perish here when the wind turned icy. The tarpaulin would help.

He straightened up his aching back, stretched towards the yellow-grey sky and yawned.

He went about the construction methodically: he made several trips down to the rock floor in front of the cave and back up again, each time carrying a couple of large rocks, which he placed on top of the tarp at strategic points. Still it flapped, like a turquoise wing.

At last, he climbed slowly down and admired his work from the front of the cave. He was desperately tired from the disrupted night and the long dark
morning. He felt himself sway slightly. His eyes were about to close of their own accord, so he climbed inside his new front door and lay down.

The light inside the tarp-covered cave was blue. He lay on his back and gazed up at the rock ceiling, inches from his face. His fingers traced the smooth line of the snake carving. He wondered how many others had seen it since it was carved. He felt he was the first. Perhaps the rock had waited out the millennia for his arrival.

He closed his eyes, feeling a blackness seize his heart. When he and Farah had kissed on the steps of the Finsbury Park Registry Office, he had thought his life was mapped out for him. Marriage, work, kids — the triple axis of perfect happiness. He couldn’t have guessed how far from his dreams his life might take him. He couldn’t have known that his life to come rested upon a handful of hasty decisions.

There were events that had shaped the course of his life so far. But it was the decisions that bothered him now. He was here, living in a rock, because he might have turned left but he turned right. He might have chosen one path, but he chose the other. It was frightening, how quickly the journey of one’s life could be altered.

And yet this shelf of rock had lain here for countless years, harbouring a message that seemed meant only for him, many thousands of miles from where his life had begun.

It made him dizzy, putting it all together.
He must have slept, but only for moments. He awoke to voices, children’s voices, cruel and high as birds. He lay very still. He heard feet land and scramble over rock. Giggles, the sound of a child coughing into a sleeve.

The blue tarpaulin attracted too much attention. It was a terrible mistake to rig it in a place so visible from the footpath.

He squeezed his eyes shut. He wanted to protect the secret inside the rock, the ancient snake. He couldn’t leave now. He felt a tribesman’s sense of duty to the man who made it. Besides, the poets said that when we don’t trust ourselves to direct our own footsteps, it was helpful to stand in the tracks of another. He needed the snake in the rock and he wasn’t going to give it up.

The corner of the tarpaulin lifted an inch and a small pinkish face peered in, the eyes wide with excitement and terror. Other faces crowded behind, amid furtive whispering.

Then the first child — a boy, around eight years old — squealed and the tarpaulin flopped back into place as the group scattered in a thunder of feet and whooping sounds.

Damn, damn, he thought. Oh God.

He lifted a shaking fingertip to the snake. The great Hafiz believed the face of God could be found in any place the ordinary man might rest his searching glance: in the knot of wood on the tavern door; in the sun shining yellow through the bottle of oil on the table; or in the swirling dirty bathwater. He remembered the lines:

Bring all the wine that’s left!

When we’re dead and wandering Paradise,

We won’t find a place more beautiful
Than this stream called Ruknabad\textsuperscript{2}

You didn’t have to be a Sufi to see that the snake in the rock was sacred.

He listened to the retreating sound of the children’s voices. He’d blown it.

Chapter 23

Lena swam steadily but her lane in the public swimming pool was crowded and the stop-start laps failed to subdue the chatter in her head.

She was still smarting about the failed birthday dinner with Artie and Cristina. Walked right into that one, she scolded herself. She reached the shallow end and stood for a moment, catching her breath. There was no point in feeling worse about Cristina. It was time to get over it.

Lena yanked off her goggles and rubbed her chlorine-stinging eyes. She couldn’t say why Cristina behaved the way she did. All she knew was that her mother had always been out of step with the rest of the world.

Her dad David had remarried long ago. He had a steady job in a city engineering firm, and a second wife, Maggie, who was a psychiatric nurse and tennis freak. They had four big, sporty children, two boys and two girls, whom Lena had met twice and never cared to think about, except to occasionally imagine them all in their big house out in Castle Hill, full of hockey shoes and knee pads and sweaty shorts.

But Cristina still raged whenever David’s name was mentioned. We were so passionate, she had told Lena, so in love that everyone else fell in love with us too. The stars and moon were jealous. Oh, Lena. You were made out of love.

Cristina always leapt at the chance to tell the story of her love affair with David because in it she was young and beautiful and full of hope. But it hurt her to tell it too, because it described the ending of her dreams.

David arrived in Stockholm in 1980, to take up a posting with a global shipping firm. Cristina was a dancer, just seventeen when they met. She was in Stockholm at the Kungliga Svenska Balletskolan on a scholarship. People had
talked about her feet, she told Lena, as if her feet were people in their own right. They talked about her line as if it were something not usually found in nature. She only had to turn her head.

She was her father’s favourite.

She took David home to Gallivare to see the northern lights on the eve of her eighteenth birthday. That night they drank Finnish vodka with her father and the three of them walked the local hills, the dirt cold and crisp under their feet. They drank too much, as usual, and they didn’t see the way the ground fell away beside the unlit woody path. But they heard the cry of terror and the sound of the fall.

They called out Cristina’s father’s name into the black abyss, but he was dead. His neck was broken.

Cristina discovered she was pregnant after David went back to Stockholm. She joined him three weeks later, broken into pieces without her father. David was nervous, Cristina told Lena, but he took her back home to his parents’ house in the Southern Highlands of NSW, where the family muttered and predicted disaster. Cristina was wild even then and beautiful in a way they found sinister, she said. Too ethnic, too strangely northern.

Cristina took Lena to Sydney where they made a mess of David’s rented flat. Cristina cleaned houses — Mosman, Darling Point, all over the affluent inner suburbs— and took Lena to work with her. The company wives fussed over Lena and bought her things. They wondered aloud where their husbands were and sometimes Cristina knew but didn’t tell.
David was promoted. Crazy Cristina, with her elfin baby and her coterie of sad housewives, got left behind. She drank even then, but not the way she drank later.

I failed you as a mother, that’s why I drink. I’m so lonely, that’s why. Who wants you when you’ve got baggage? I never got where I wanted. I was a single mother. Never succeeded. That’s why. And so on. Every time a little dig that made sure Lena never forgot whose fault it was really.

Lena sunk slowly under the water, eyes open. The blue was calming, the momentary deafness a relief. She surfaced and sucked in a deep breath. She must put Cristina out of her mind.

Her thoughts drifted back to the gallery. She remembered the second’s pause, when Andrew had looked up at her with inky pupils before she’d stepped into the office and slowly picked up the fallen fifty dollar note.

He laughed ‘It’s just a bit of fun,’ he said. ‘Want a line?’ He lifted the little blue plate.

She declined and walked back to her desk at the front of the building.

So what if he took drugs? She couldn’t care less that Andrew lollled about out the back all day, getting high. She didn’t care about the fakes or whatever it was he was selling. But she felt alarmed for Daniel. And she cared very much that she was facing a letdown, when she had begun to feel — tentatively, speculatively — hopeful about her life.

She glanced over at the big clock on the wall; 6.30 pm. Andrew would probably still be at the gallery. He’d lock up, he was planning to stay late anyhow.
She ducked under the lane rope, swum to the side and hauled herself out onto the tiles. As she walked back to the changing room she decided to skip the shower. That way she should be sure to catch Andrew before he left.

Lena walked the final block to the gallery slowly, so she could gather her thoughts. She reckoned she’d become rather good at confrontation over the years. Fighting with Cristina was, after all, quite an art. She wanted an explanation from Andrew about the wooden boxes, about the drugs, but she saw that could mean an ugly scene. I’ll probably have to quit, she thought. The anger steamed up in her head. The unfairness of it.

The wind carried an unexpected chill and she shoved her cold hands into the pockets of her jacket as she walked. For a second she thought of Magpie: was she out in this cold?

Soon the gallery steps came into view. She stopped. Lights were burning inside, as she expected, but parked out the front was the same rented flatbed ute that had made Andrew’s delivery. Instinctively, she put her head down and ducked behind a car, not wanting to be seen. She faltered, wondering whether to turn back. Then she heard voices. Her breath was coming fast and she found her heart was racing.

Why not confront them? She thought angrily. Why not just walk over there?

Barely a moment later, Andrew jogged down the gallery steps. Then, to her surprise, Daniel appeared at the top of the steps above, leaning heavily on his stick. Lena drew in a breath. Quick disappointment landed in her gut like a
handful of clay. There was no need to tell Daniel what was going on at the gallery. Whatever it was, he was right in the middle of it.

She sank into a crouch by the bumper of the car and put her head down for a second. She heard the motor of a car firing up and the ute sped past her.

From her awkward position, she looked up at Daniel on the steps. He seemed to be swaying, his body weight shifting from the balls of his feet to the heels, as if was expecting something else to happen. The bright lights of the gallery foyer gave him a yellowish aura and the shadows on his face and body seemed to have deepened. She felt as if she was looking at someone she didn’t know.

Lena felt sudden, irrational fear — a shrill note drowning her sensible thoughts. She almost cried out from the sensation of it and her heart thumped as she watched the old man turn around and begin the slow shuffle back inside.

A low voice behind her caused her to almost jump out of her skin. ‘Do you know him?’

Lena gasped as she straightened up. She turned to face the man who stood in the inky shadow of the peppermint gum tree. ‘Pardon?’

‘The old man, is that Daniel Faber?’

‘Yes. Why?’

But the man didn’t answer. He stepped forward so a slice of yellow light fell across his face and she thought immediately that he had the look of a cat: a strong and angular face and calm brown eyes, watchful and alert. He stared intently at the gallery door and didn’t appear to notice as she slipped past him and retraced her footsteps back to Oxford Street.
Felix woke at four in the morning, limbs drenched and coiled around the hotel bed sheets. He threw off the sheets, jolted into wakefulness by a tormenting dream.

He sat up, wiped a hand across his clammy chest and took in the room, the hulking dark shapes of the dresser, the table. The shadowy image of Daniel Faber standing on the steps of the Paddington gallery came into this mind. The whole scene had appeared distinctly odd — the crouching girl, the unsteady old man. How strange, indeed, that someone else was spying on Daniel Faber.

He swung his legs out of bed and groped in darkness for the glass of water on the bedside table. His fingertips rested, instead, on his car keys.

It was still dark at Bondi Beach, well before dawn. He sat down on the stubby grass above the beach and stared out at the faintly discernable line where ocean met sky, where the first optimistic glimpse of day would appear.

Tiredness forced him beyond the point of irritation into a hazy numbness. He scratched his rough chin and fought to muster his thoughts. He should go past the gallery one more time, see if he could get the old man to speak to him. Make up some pretence or other. He could say he was a journalist, which wasn’t a lie. It would be good to get a feel for the old man, at least.

Then he ought to go to Joyce’s. He would read Jozef’s letters there. He shivered and gave thanks for the stillness of the morning.

Twenty minutes passed before the dawn announced itself, a golden line far out to sea. He felt his hopes lift.

Voices reached him from the path behind. ‘Steady here.’
‘Oh yes, I see.’

He turned to see two figures coming slowly down the sloping grass in the direction of the beach. As they drew closer Felix saw it was an elderly woman and her husband, supporting each other and narrating the conditions of each step — a bit uneven, very good, they should get this bit fixed — until they were next to him on the path. They greeted him, smiling.

The old man nodded in the direction of the surf. ‘You swimming? Been seventeen degrees all week.’

Felix heard the trace of a long-ago accent. ‘Maybe.’

They nodded and passed him, then continued down to the water’s edge. The idea of a swim suddenly appealed to him; he waited a suitable interval then stood and followed them down to the water.

He stripped to his underwear at the high water mark and cast a furtive glance around. He realised it was years since he had swum in the sea — and he couldn’t recall ever having resolved to do it spontaneously like this. In his y-fronts, for all to see. Other people had appeared on the beach, he noticed: a jogger with a small dog on a lead and another swimmer up the other end of the beach, just a yellow swimming cap bobbing in the water.

He stepped into the surf and gasped. It was much colder than he’d expected. He blundered past the knee-high froth until he was waist deep, then he plunged his head under, into the bone-aching chill.

He surfaced with an involuntary shout and bounced on the spot, shaking the feeling of shock from his body. Then he made an attempt to swim, thrusting parallel to the beach. He began to move along steadily, his body growing numb to the chill. Without warning a powerful undertow sucked him sideways and a
big breaker tore over him, sweeping him arse-first along the bottom for a terrifying ten seconds, before smacking him onto the beach.

He sat up on the sand, lungs bursting. Water streamed from his nose.

The old man who had passed him on the path tottered over. ‘Alright mate?’

Felix wiped his eyes. ‘Got the spin cycle. Nothing broken.’

The old man laughed. ‘Bloody dumpers. They go for the tourists. Nice present to you.’

‘Thanks for the warning.’

The woman strode slowly out of the water behind him. ‘It’s the sand in the undies you’ve gotta watch out for,’ she called.

Felix stood up, the telltale sandbag of his pants moulded to his backside. ‘Jesus, I see what you mean.’

The old man nodded in the direction of the other end of the beach, scratching the brown hide of his belly.

‘Better off up at the north end today. It’s ugly down here. Want to join us?’

Felix fell into step with them on the wet sand at the side of the shore.

The old man turned his head towards Felix. ‘Just arrived?’

Felix nodded.

A little white dog appeared and presented the woman with a wet stick. She threw it into the water and the terrier yapped at the edge of the waves before galloping in. She left Felix and her companion to help it recover the stick.

‘Where you headed?’ the man asked.

‘Not sure yet.’
‘Good. Everything gets mapped out for people these days.’

‘I agree.’

‘Bloody internet. You can’t get lost anywhere now. You get more than you ever wanted to know.’

Felix crossed his arms, a thought occurring to him. When he was researching for the magazine, he’d always begin with a search online — who didn’t these days? That would bring up all the conventional material on any subject: people who were working in the area, corporations and government bodies who had an interest. When he was done trawling through those pages, he would search the university library databases for academic literature. Of course, he’d gone straight online when he started looking for material about Daniel. But he hadn’t thought about academic work. A search of the art journals might give him a new lead.

‘Here we are then.’

Felix turned to look too. The sea was much calmer here, the waves glassy and rolling. He ventured in, still cursing from the cold, but found he could float quite easily, watching the early morning planes descend towards the airport.

Soon the old man waved goodbye and he and his companion set off up the beach, leaving a trail of prints in the wet sand.

Felix wallowed for a while longer, until his skin felt tight from the cold. Then he waded to shore. He shook the sand out of his hair. Christ, I didn’t even bring a towel, he thought.

Back at the hotel room, he made his way across the lush carpet to the bathroom on sandy feet. He stripped off his wet clothes and rinsed his feet, watching the
sand collect around the plughole. Then he loped, naked and shivering, into the bedroom and unclasped the precious watch and set it on the bedside table.

He emptied two paper shopping bags onto the bed, to look at the new jeans and shirt he’d bought on his way home the night before. He’d walked back to the hotel along the length of Oxford Street, stopping now and then to peer in the windows of the clothes shops he passed. When his father was dying, he wore the same clothes day in, day out, carrying trays up the carpeted stairs, changing the TV channels, fetching Jozef’s drugs from the chemist — then finally throwing the same clothes into a suitcase to come to Australia. It was time for a change.

He walked into the bathroom and stepped into the shower.

Jozef had been fussy about clothes. The old man had had all his shirts laundered. You couldn’t get those kind of creases at home, he’d told Felix. Jozef’s suits were always well made and smart. But when it came to casual things, he had no idea. Kate had said that Jozef’s weekend wear made him look like he was on day release. Those camel coloured jackets, for heaven’s sake. Those loafers.

Kate had a knack for turning an ordinary word — like ‘loafers’ — into an insult, thought Felix. He lathered his hair. Sand collected under his fingernails and around the metal drain at his feet.

At Felix’s secondary school, there had been a strict uniform policy. Eleven year old Felix had been so excited to get his new school clothes, he’d run upstairs the minute he and Jozef had arrived back from the shops. When he dressed he made his way to the landing, in front of the tall mirror. He liked what he saw and puffed his chest out, proudly.
Jozef climbed the stairs slowly, frowning.

Felix told Jozef that the shirt was a bit stiff around the collar.

‘I have to stand like this.’ He put his chin up to show his dad.

‘Yes, they do that on purpose,’ Jozef said grimly.

Then Jozef knelt down on the carpet and gently helped Felix into the brown brogues. When Felix regarded himself once more in the full-length mirror, he caught the wince on Jozef’s face.

That night the Chisholm brothers, Peter and Audrey, stopped by to wish Felix luck for the start of term. They stayed past bedtime, talking to Jozef in low voices in the front room.

Felix crept back to the mirror on the landing and sat on the carpet. He heard Jozef arguing with Aubrey and Peter, his father’s voice carrying through the still house, the words unforgettable.

‘You wouldn’t put a child in swastikas and jackboots, would you?’

Aubrey’s voice was indignant. ‘A uniform doesn’t make a fascist.’

Peter hushed them both. ‘We’ve paid the fees now. Let’s at least give him the term.’

Please, Felix thought desperately. Let me.

Jozef’s voice had been almost a growl. ‘If he comes back talking God and Heaven, I don’t know what I’ll do.’

The previous night he’d lain awake and thought about the dazzling and forbidden possibility of God up there in the stars.

Felix stepped out of the hotel shower and dried his face in the towel. As it had turned out, the school he went to in England was a moderate success. He gained confidence, learned a thing or two about himself and felt a little pride in
his achievements for the first time. He saw, looking back, that he had been liked
for being a kind boy, a boy who paid attention. Who was helpful and reliable. He
couldn’t have been happier.

He’d been careful not to mention too much of the God business at home.
There was an Anglican service twice a week and assembly with prayers and
hymns every morning. He liked the hymns especially. They were kingly and
righteous and he loved belting out the stirring melodies while Mrs Finch
pounded the piano on the stage.

He’d thought about joining the choir but imagined Jozef’s face and joined
the chess club instead, which was where he’d found Salil Rao, the smartest boy
in his year.

Felix dressed in his new jeans and shirt then examined himself in the hotel
mirror. He fought the disappointment that lately came when he scrutinised his
reflection. He pulled himself together. He still looked ok.

He went to his desk and opened his computer. He navigated to his
academic article search engine and typed ‘Daniel Faber’ into the search field.

Four journal articles came back, three by the same author. He squinted to
read the name: Lena Archer.
Chapter 25

Lena regarded the blank canvas from the doorway of her flat. She couldn’t decide if it was a good sign or a bad one. Cristina never apologised, it wasn’t her style. So what did it mean?

She stepped into the room and dropped her bag onto the floor, still unnerved. She turned on the kitchen tap and as she filled the kettle, Magpie appeared and entwined herself around Lena’s legs.

Most days when she arrived home, Lena was greeted by a terrible stillness, from the tangle of bedclothes, left in a rush, to the single unwashed breakfast dish on the sink. For all that she loved her independence, there was no denying that after a day at work she wondered if she was lonely.

Now Lena listened to the bubbling of the kettle and allowed herself a little smile. Bloody Cristina, calling the shots as usual. Guerilla love: it was her mother’s style.

She picked the cat up and carried her upside down like a baby, tummy fur exposed, to the little couch. She could feel the rake of Magpie’s ribcage beneath the fur. The cat yawned and extended her claws, swatting the space between them. The wind outside seemed to pick up and set the doors rattling. Lena’s gaze returned to the canvas.

She put the cat on the floor and knelt beside the bed. She groped in the blackness underneath it for her pencil box; she drew it out onto the rug in front of her. She chose a soft 4B drawing pencil, the point sharpened to a line, and carried it over to the side of the bed. Carefully, she pressed the tip of the pencil against the canvas and drew a faint line. The pencil transmitted each bump in the
surface of the material to her hand and her wrist, a feeling so familiar it almost took Lena’s breath away.

She stood back. It was too soon. She threw the pencil onto the bed.

She turned off the kettle and paced the little room. She unlocked the rickety French doors that opened to the garden above the ocean and looked out. The full force of the southerly blew against her chest.

It was stupid. Why couldn’t she draw?

She tugged a chair over to her wardrobe and stood on it to reach the sketchbook stored on top. She stepped down and blew away the dust from the sketchbook’s cover. Better to start small, she thought, stepping down onto the floorboards.

Twenty minutes later she stood up and stretched her legs. The sketchbook lay on the ground at her feet. The colours she’d chosen — the azure blue of the ocean and the golden beige of the sand — were the true theme of her wandering, unhappy childhood. A hundred addresses, each of them a broken down place by the sea, she thought. There were times when it had seemed Cristina would do anything to be with the man she wanted. Once, Cristina had packed Lena and all their things into a Datsun 120Y and driven through the night to Coffs Harbour. Cristina’s boyfriend Enda had been transferred up there by the Ambulance Service and they’d trailed after him, on Cristina’s insistence, like a run of bad luck.

They’d spent two long months in that beach town. Lena gave up on school altogether and walked to the beach every day. It’s madness with your pale skin, her mother said one morning. Not a word about missing lessons.
The colours of the pastel drawing reminded Lena of the listless day when she had managed to talk a friend, Julia, from the block of flats where Enda lived, into wagging school and going swimming with her. They must have been about nine years old, she thought now, around the time when girls are full of secret embarrassment and sudden shared grudges.

It was a blue day, the sea was as calm as a cup of milk. The girls sunbathed on the scorching sea wall in spite of knowing better. There was more to look forward to when they got back to the hot sand: half a bag of Burger Rings and torn porno mag they’d found stuffed under a bush next to the sports field, hilarious and disgusting.

They jumped in off the concrete groyne then floated behind the breakers, giggling and drifting, fingertips touching until Lena panicked, looked back at the beach and saw how far they’d drifted from the shore. The sudden and awful terror could have killed them both if they’d let it; could have dragged them under as they screamed. But they struggled to shore. It took them half an hour. They lay there coughing and crying. The beach was completely empty. There was no-one to witness how lucky they’d been, or how stupid.

On the walk home they argued about whose fault it was and had both ended up in tears, until Cristina drove past and picked them up and took them the rest of the way. It should have been a rescue. But when the girls slid onto the back seat of the car, Lena knew immediately that her mother was drunk as anything. Cristina drove them home in that shabby, reckless state and Lena and Julia were scared witless again. The next day at school Julia told everyone Lena’s mum was a drunken slut and put a rotten orange in her sports bag.
Now Lena pulled the sheet from the sketchbook and tore it in two. Coffs Harbour was just a notch on the stick of bad memories. She felt immediately cross at herself for dwelling on the past. What would Gabriel say? Build a bridge and get over it. Something neat and easy like that. Something, she suddenly realised, that was unintelligent and unhelpful.

She screwed the piece of paper into a ball and tossed it into the kitchen bin then slowly packed the drawing things away. She turned the canvas to face the wall then she went out into the garden. She stepped over the rusting garden tools outside the shed and checked behind the overflowing compost. She followed the side path up as far as the jacaranda tree with the faded, fluttering prayer flags, then back down the steep rocky path towards the drop-off and the sea.

The next morning, she arrived at the gallery early and found, to her relief, that she was first to arrive. She needed to work out a way to talk to Daniel, to find out what was really going on.

She sorted the mail and made tea, then settled down at her computer at the reception to work on Paul Collier’s program notes. She’d have to send the final version to the printer today or risk missing the deadline. It would be good to finish that, at least, before she left. At a quarter past eleven, she looked up to see Andrew bounding up the gallery steps, a smile on his pink face.

‘Everything OK?’

She kept the note of irritation out of her voice and her eyes on the screen.

‘Fine.’
‘Good.’

He walked past her to the back office and she leant back in her chair to stretch her neck, her forehead creased into a frown.

She didn’t recognise the young man when he stepped through the door of the gallery. But when he came towards the counter and rather nervously asked to speak to Daniel, she remembered where she’d heard his voice. The old man, is that Daniel Faber?

She looked up. It was the man who had spoken to her on the street the other night. He looked rather different under the gallery reception’s lights — not quite so feline, nor so beady-eyed.

She cleared her throat and blinked. If he were to ask, she had no explanation for her behaviour from the night before.

‘Daniel’s not here,’ she said.

The man seemed almost relieved. He seemed to be considering his next move. ‘Look, I’m trying to find someone,’ he said. ‘Do you know Lena Archer?’

Lena put her palms down on the reception counter top, steadying herself.

‘Who are you?’

‘My name’s Felix Fabin.’

‘I’m sorry. I think you should really speak to Daniel.’

She stood up and moved around the counter, leading him towards the door. Andrew appeared in the hallway.

‘Lena, I’m going out. Back in an hour or so.’ He smiled brightly and stepped between Felix and Lena on his way to the door.

Lena felt the heat rising in her cheeks. The glass door swung shut after Andrew. She folded her arms and looked at Felix Fabin.
He gave a *What can you do?* shrug and a smile.

She couldn’t help the half-smile. She paused and looked him over slowly — his dark brown eyes, the note of apology in his expression.

‘Can I ask you some questions? About Daniel Faber, I mean.’

‘No. You can talk to him yourself.’

‘I’d be so grateful. I didn’t say please. I should have. Please.’

‘You were outside the gallery,’ She bit a hangnail. ‘You spoke to me.’ It was a statement, not a question.

She looked him for a long moment. She was always wary of getting caught up in people’s tawdry dramas — it was the kind of thing Cristina did all the time. But on the other hand, she felt she didn’t owe Daniel her loyalty any more. He was keeping secrets, wasn’t he? This man Felix seemed genuine enough.

She walked back behind the reception desk and tore a corner off her notepad then scrawled her number. She handed it to him across the counter.

‘My number. I can’t talk to you here.’

‘Thanks. That’s great.’ He seemed shocked, looking down at the scrap in his palm.

‘No promises.’ She sat down at her computer, suddenly tired.

‘Can I call you tonight?’

‘Sure.’

Whatever, she thought. *This place.*

Felix gave the same uncertain smile, then turned and walked down the steps.
She walked home through Centennial Park. When her phone rang, her heart leapt. It was Gabriel. She answered with relief.

‘Gabe? Thank God, I’ve been trying —’

‘Oh, Lena. Something’s happened. My parents are passing through town at the end of this week. Sur prise!’

Lena rolled her eyes. The unsmiling, homophobic Changs.

‘Oh, shit. Bad luck.’

She knew what was coming: she and Gabriel had a longstanding arrangement. He removed his ‘Tom of Finland’ dirty prints from the living room walls and replaced them with out-of-focus holiday snaps of Lena. She moved in for the duration, slept in Gabriel’s bed and made excuses about not joining in their family events.

‘Tom’s going to his uncle’s. Will you stay, be my ever-loving bride?’

‘Gabe, can’t you say I’m out of town?’

‘We said that last time.’

‘Say we broke up.’

‘Are you kidding? They love you! They’ll be heartbroken.’

She gnawed a fingernail. ‘Just one night?’

‘Thursday. I promise.’

Lena put her fingertips to her hot cheeks. ‘Sure. I guess.’

‘Thanks. Gotta go.’

‘Ok.’

But he was already gone.
She arrived home to a second surprise — Cristina was sitting on the couch in Lena’s flat with Magpie on her lap.

‘Christ Mama! You scared the living daylights out of me. What are you doing here?’

Cristina gave a shrug. ‘Just came by. Can’t a mother see her daughter?’

Cristina smiled, but her gaze darted away. Lena glanced at her mother. She noticed the dark shadows beneath Cristina’s eyes.

Cristina stretched and stood up, then walked to the glass doors and fumbled in her pocket for her smokes and lighter. She blew the smoke in the direction of the door, nodded her head at the canvas.

‘Whadda you think? Good, eh?’ She grinned, a hard edge in her voice.

Lena saw the shake in her mother’s hands. ‘I love it, thanks Mama.’

‘Don’t say I never gave you nothing.’ The cigarette smoke wafted thickly into the room.

‘As if I would.’ Lena let the cat jump to the floor and put her bag down.

‘You staying to eat?’

Cristina shook her head.

‘No, no sweetheart. You eat. I’ll go soon.’ She flicked her hand and looked back at Lena with the same brittle smile.

Lena picked up her bag and dug in it for her purse. ‘Hey, mama. I know you like Thai. What about takeaway? My shout.’

‘Ok. I’ll go get it. I need smokes too.’ Cristina sniffed, pocketing her lighter.

‘You alright for money?’
‘No, no I’m OK. Well, five bucks would help.’ Cristina’s eyes were glassy pools.

Lena handed her mother a fifty dollar note and watched her go. No use asking what’s wrong, she thought. With Cristina, the story usually comes out after the bender, along with the bile and remorse and self-loathing.

Lena poured a glass of wine and sat down at the table. She put her head in her hands. A bath — that’s what she needed. A minute to herself. She drained her glass then hauled herself to her feet. The wine had made her dizzy.

Look at you, she thought. Drunken hypocrite.

She woke to the insistent trill of her telephone. She rolled over in the tepid bathwater and hauled herself out just in time to find it under a pile of clothes on the chair beside the bath. She recognised Felix’s strangely formal English voice:

‘Hi Lena. Sorry, is it a bad time?’

She shivered, the water on her naked body rapidly growing icy. ‘Uh, what time is it?’

‘Eight thirty.’

‘Really? Shit.’

‘I could call back some other time.’

‘Wait a minute.’

She wrapped herself in a towel and grabbed her things, then trotted along the back path to her flat. It was empty, the glass doors were banging in the wind. Cristina has been gone for more than an hour. Lena felt suddenly sick.

‘Oh shit.’

‘What’s wrong? Lena?’
‘Gotta go. I've got to help my mother.’

‘Is she hurt? Can I help?’

‘No.’

‘I trained as a doctor.’

‘Call me later. I’ve got to go.’

She hung up.

According to Lena’s neighbours, the Duke of Gloucester pub used to be the best place on the eastern beaches to get speed and pot. Nowadays it also had pokies for the gamblers and a bloke with a moped who did home delivery for the middle class cokeheads. Lena put these details out of her mind and pushed open the heavy door and scanned the room.

Cristina was leaning over the pool table in the front bar, taking her shot. Her eyes were heavy and she was swaying and laughing loudly. Lena swore bitterly. Cristina must have taken something before she’d even reached Lena’s. She was bombed.

Behind Cristina, a tanned young man in paint-flecked boots whistled at Cristina as she bent forward across the pool table, giggling.

Lena hurried across the room. ‘Hey mama. What are you doing?’

The men in the room cheered.

Cristina looked up in surprise and Lena grabbed hold of her thin arm and tugged her towards the door. Cristina was light as a sparrow. Lena heard the burst of rough men’s laughter follow them out the old door as Cristina lurched forward and pulled Lena down the concrete steps.

Lena screamed as her ankle rolled.
Cristina staggered to her feet on the pavement, crying. ‘He’s gone,’ she said. ‘Bloody Artie’s gone back to his wife and kids.’

Lena looked up at her. The wind was freezing; they need to get moving.

‘Tell me what you’ve taken, mama!’

Cristina’s head bobbed on her thin neck. She wiped her nose on her sleeve then set off unsteadily down the hill towards Lena’s place. Lena got to her feet and limped after her.

‘Mama, no!’

By the time Lena caught up, she found Cristina lying in the garden underneath the window ledge of a block of flats. Eyes closed, still as a corpse.

Lena bent and clutched her ankle. She looked at her mother and shook her head, tears forming quickly. The wind whipped up Bondi Road and Lena felt hollow as a reed.

Her phone vibrated in her pocket. She saw Felix’s number came up and answered it, hands trembling. ‘Yup?’

‘It’s Felix again. Are you OK?’

Lena’s voice was flat but insistent. ‘Come now. I need help. Can you come? Bondi Road, the one that runs down to the beach. About halfway.’

For pity’s sake, she thought, be human. She lowered herself onto the low wall beside the flats.

When Felix appeared ten minutes later, they were still in their positions: Cristina stretched underneath the window, lips already blue with cold and Lena sitting on the wall with her teeth chattering and her silvery hair streaming up the hill behind her.
We must look like a religious painting, Lena thought. Something about sins and punishment.

‘Oh. You came,’ she said stiffly.

He walked over to where Cristina lay beneath the window and crouched down by her side. ‘Blimey.’

Lena hobbled over. ‘Can you help me get her back to my place?’

‘Of course.’

In the semi-dark, Lena watched as Felix lowered Cristina onto the couch. He knelt beside her and lifted her right eyelid between forefinger and thumb.

Lena leant over him, still shaking from the cold. ‘What on earth are you doing?’

‘I’m trying to get a look at her pupils. You ought to sit down and put your foot up on the table if you want to walk on that tomorrow. Besides, you’re in my light.’ Felix grinned up at her. ‘Trust me.’

She slumped down at the table, grateful to take the weight of her sore ankle. She lifted her foot and placed it on gingerly on a chair. ‘Trust me I’m a doctor? Please.’

‘I didn’t say I was a doctor. I said I trained as one.’

He pressed his fingers to Cristina’s neck and looked at his watch, a big silver thing that slid up and down his wrist. ‘Although, in this case, an ambulance might have done you just as well.’

‘Sorry. I didn’t think. I was about to kill her myself.’
She looked down at the flecked Formica surface of the table and scraped her fingernail at something on the surface.

Felix stood up and stretched his back. ‘You’ve got no idea what she’s taken?’

‘Nope, sorry.’

Lena watched as he unfolded the blanket at Cristina’s feet and covered her. Then he carefully pulled the strands of hair out of her mouth. Cristina rolled onto her side and started snoring.

He let out a laugh. ‘There you go. That’s the thanks I get.’

Lena shook her head. ‘She’s a medical miracle, my mother.’

‘Really?’

‘Put it this way: we won’t need to embalm her when she goes.’

‘Well, we should call the hospital to make sure. One thing’s for certain — she won’t like herself much tomorrow.’

‘She’ll have to join the queue.’

Cristina stirred and muttered a string of incoherent words.

Lena looked over at him. ‘How did you stand the medical stuff? Training as a doctor I mean. Those poor, dying people. All that blood.’

‘I love blood. Marvelous stuff. Works very hard, does blood. You should see it under a microscope.’ His eyes were full of amusement.

‘I’ve seen skin,’ she said. ‘Under a microscope, I mean. It wasn’t my skin. It was from a boy in my class at school. It was very intimate.’ She laughed, suddenly self-conscious.
He turned to her and put his hands in his pockets. Head to one side, remembering: ‘Blood’s great. Platelets fly through it like a fleet of spaceships. But you need a really powerful microscope so see that.’

His voice faded. Cristina’s breathing filled the brief silence between them.

Lena watched the blush creep up his neck, spreading like crimson ink in water.

‘Well.’

‘We should call the hospital.’

‘Yep, I’ll get the number.’

They sat at Lena’s table, listening to Cristina’s ragged snores. Outside the rattling glass doors, the wind picked up.

Lena moved her ankle right and left.

‘Feeling ok?’ he asked.

‘On the mend.’

‘Good. No leapfrog for you tomorrow.’

She smiled. ‘Ok, let’s talk about Daniel Faber. You start.’

Felix took three folded paper sheets from his shoulder bag and handed them to Lena.

‘Sorry for this,’ he said.

‘Sorry for what?’

She smoothed the sheets and peered down at the title page: Transcript: interview with Jozef Fabin, 1987.
Yasir peered out from the edge of the cave. It was late morning; he’d overslept. These last few nights, he hardly noticed the cold rock through the layers of his bed. He found himself sinking quickly into a deep sleep that sometimes lasted six or seven hours. It was a long time since he’d felt so rested.

He looked out at his paradise, at the blue sea and milky sky, and saw that someone had visited in the night. A small plastic grocery bag was sitting a few feet away on the plateau of rock.

He swung his legs over the rock ledge and glanced hurriedly about. His stomach rumbled. This was the second gift. Yesterday, in the same place, he’d found a carton of milk, a packet of biscuits and some slices of cheese wrapped up in waxed paper.

The previous day the benefactor had also left him a pair of leather shoes — a handsome pair of men’s brogues. Yasir couldn’t remember ever owning such good-looking shoes. They were hardly worn, the maker’s mark still visible on the smooth soles. They only wanted for a pair of laces. He tried them on and stomped around the rock ledge in them.

He clambered down to the rock ledge and opened the plastic shopping bag. This morning it contained a bar of soap and a pair of socks, two oranges and a block of chocolate. He lifted the slab of chocolate to his face and breathed deeply. His mouth began to fill with saliva and his stomach answered, churning in a low rumble.

He picked his way back to the cave and found the last of yesterday’s biscuits and then sat and ate the two together, with pleasure. He glanced around
for the plastic water bottle he usually filled from the beachside tap. Place is getting messy, he thought. I should be more careful.

Then he saw the man.

‘Hey, doc.’ The stranger lifted a hand in greeting.

Yasir squinted, heart pounding. After an anxious second, he recognised the man by his spectacles. He was from the Matthew Talbot shelter. Some do-gooder.

‘No. No thank you. Goodbye.’ His voice sounded odd, hardly his own — it emerged as a croak, coarse from lack of use. He shook his head and looked down at the wrapper of the chocolate bar in his lap. He felt foolish as a schoolboy, lured out of his bolthole by sweets.

‘Doc?’

Yasir got to his feet, crumbs falling onto the rock.

‘One thing. Is your name Yasir?’

Yasir looked up. The man with the glasses had said his name correctly. Clever-clever, he thought. Intent on making a pest of himself. He turned his face up, feeling the wind cut against his cheek.

‘Someone’s looking for you.’

Yasir heard the upward inflection, that curiously Australian note of hope.

‘Someone?’ His own voice surprised him again. It was as unfamiliar as a stranger’s.

The young man nodded. ‘He says he’s your brother. He’s come a long way.’

Yasir felt the breath leave his body and his solar plexus tighten. Ahmad? It wasn’t possible.
The man huddled lower into his jacket. ‘Come to the Matthew Talbot to see him?’

The young man’s voice lost its calm authority. Ah, we come to the point, thought Yasir. A muscle in the young man’s cheek twitched nervously.

Yasir shook his head. He watched the young man run his hands through his hair and felt a moment of pity for him. He’d been sent to tell him lies but it wasn’t his fault.

‘No.’ He crossed his arms, the thudding of his heart against his wrists.

‘It’s true. A man comes every day to see if you’ve turned up. Someone said you were at the beaches.’

‘Ahmad is dead.’ Yasir felt his throat tighten as the words flew out. He didn’t know if they were true, only feared it was so.

‘Suit yourself.’ The man shrugged then made as if to turn away.

Yasir felt sudden panic. What if it were true? What if Ahmad was alive and had sent this trembling boy to find him, for pity’s sake? ‘Wait.’

The young man turned.

Yasir pointed to the paperback sticking out of his jacket pocket. ‘What have you got there?’


He held it out. Yasir stood and shuffled forward in the awkward shoes. He reached for it, turned it over and read the back. The man shifted his weight from one foot to the other. The wind crashed against them both.

Yasir looked up, eyes narrowed. ‘I suppose they’ll send you again soon?’

‘Prob’ly.’
'Give it back to you then.'

'Ok.'

'What’s your name?'

'Robbie.'

'Thank you, Robbie.'

There was no way to signal that the conversation was over, except to climb back into the cave and wait for the awkward Robbie to take his leave.

Yasir traced the line of the snake in the rock and muttered low thanks. He rolled onto his side and shifted the tarp so that he could see the shadows of the clouds moving across the beach.

Ahmad, Ahmad. Yasir remembered many things about his brother — vibrant flashes of their shared boyhood, rich with the colours and flavours of the village. The grey front of the concrete terraces along the main street. The television in the front room of his father’s house, with its coathanger aerial. Pomegranate, the bitter white and the burst of flavour from the jewel buds inside. Coca-Cola in a can with two straws.

They’d argued, of course. As boys they did little else. See this melon? You hit it with a stick like this. Through the goal post — between the wall and the road sign. No like this, idiot. You hit like an old woman. And so on.

They were still arguing as grown men. Pride got in the way of everything that had passed between them, he saw that now. When Yasir finally went back home to the village, it was because Ahmad had made a final and stinging assault to his pride.
Your bride is dead, Ahmad had said. The phone line crackled; even in this
day and age, Yasir had thought, why can I never get a good line home?
Ahmad continued: Your parents are gone. Big man of the university. You with so
many letters after your name but no courage. Will you not come home now and
help protect your dead father’s house?

Yasir reached to the back of the cave and found Robbie’s book. He opened the
cover and breathed the faint, musty smell of its yellow pages. The book was
falling apart. It would soon reach the end of its life. It had been mishandled: the
spine was broken, the page ends curled.

It’s been heavily used, like me, he thought. But we both have one more
round in us.
Chapter 27

Afternoon sunlight struck the surface of the stretch of water between Scotland Island and Ku-ring-gai Chase National Park. Felix watched the zig-zag patterns form on the surface of the water until he had to look away, dazzled. Joyce rowed steadily, letting out her breath in time with the dipping oars and he trailed a hand in the water, feeling guilty for being so idle. He nudged Joyce with his toe.

‘Go on. Let me do it for a minute.’

‘Get off me! I said I can manage.’

She pulled on the oars, sending the boat into the sheltered bay. Felix looked over at the island behind them, then turned back to examine the place they were heading to, a sheltered beach in the national park. They drifted for a minute, drawn in towards the beach by the small waves lapping towards the bay.

Joyce wiped her sweaty face and waved her hand at the thrumming bush. Behind the beach, up in the heart of the national park, mist was rising from the gums.

‘You have to row, see. It’s a shame to bring a noisy motor up here.’ Joyce nudged him. ‘Hop out and pull us in, will you?’

He stepped over the side, wincing at the initial chill, and took hold of the front of the boat. He tugged it through the shallows to the beach. When he was ankle deep, Joyce climbed over the side of the boat in an unsteady movement that was almost a roll.

She grabbed the side of the boat and steadied herself. ‘Never mind the rowing, that’s the bit that nearly kills me. Just can’t get the knees to bend in the right direction.’

Felix laughed. ‘You’re doing alright.’
‘Hewn out of granite, some would say.’

‘Exactly. Making me look soft.’

‘Too much sitting on your arse, sunshine.’

She splashed away towards shore, leaving him to tug the metal tinny up the sand. He watched her take off her hat and wiped away the sweat, then flop down onto the dry sand up near the sheoaks. She wriggled out of her backpack and pulled out two bottles of cider and a box of crackers.

He shifted the boat as far as he could then tied the long rope around the base of a tree. He trudged across to the shade and flopped down next to Joyce.

He nodded over to the bottles. ‘What’re we drinking to this time?’

She squinted back at him. ‘To you, I reckon. I thought you needed a taste of the good life before getting stuck into Jozef’s letters.’

‘Why drink to me? What’ve I done?’

She shrugged. ‘You stepped up.’

‘Eh?’

‘Did what the situation demanded. Came here, followed your dad’s trip through.’

He took a long swig of the sweet, cold cider. ‘I need you to help me get my facts straight about Jozef’s visit.’

‘Alright.’ She cleared her throat. ‘He came to my old place in Paddington. Then I took him down south. God knows, he was a nervous wreck. Not in any condition to go fronting up to Daniel Faber.’

‘Then what?’

‘He came back to Sydney alone, to go to Daniel Faber’s gallery. That’s when I lost track of him.’
He stared out at the water again.

Joyce handed him a wedge of cheese and a cracker. ‘There’s more. He sent me postcards. He wanted people to know he was ok.’

‘Really?’ No-one bothered to tell me, he thought.

‘Yep. You’ll see them when we get back.’

‘Where did he go?’

‘Oh all about. Country NSW, the centre. Into the bush, I expect. But he sent the cards from towns.’

‘What was he doing out there?’

‘I don’t know. But I’d hazard a guess.’

‘Go on then.’

Joyce took a swig of her cider. ‘Sitting under the bodhi tree, metaphorically speaking. That’s what. Thinking. Going from place to place. Walking, perhaps.’ She paused.

Felix remembered how Jozef had seemed tanned and fit when he’d returned.

Joyce continued. ‘Maybe he talked to people. Who knows? He did what he needed to do.’

‘To get away, you mean?’

‘He needed to change things up. He needed to be in nature. See himself differently. Get a bit of insight.’

‘Right.’

‘Oh, shit!’

Joyce dropped her cider bottle and creamy froth spilled onto the sand. Felix grabbed the bottle and turned just in time to see the narrow head of a big
lizard as it darted back a pace or two from where they sat. He scrambled to his feet. The thing was nearly four meters long, with two-inch claws and mean, stupid eyes.

Joyce was breathless from laughing so hard. ‘Nice of the locals to put on a show for you.’

‘What do you call that thing?’

‘A lace monitor.’

Felix caught his breath. The monitor skulked behind a scrubby tree, not yet prepared for a full retreat. ‘Fucking hell. Excuse me.’

‘Don’t apologise on my account. First time I saw one I screamed loud enough to sour milk. Jesus, wait til you see the funnel webs.’

He laughed. ‘I should be so lucky.’

‘As the prophet Kylie Minogue said. Come on, let’s go for a bit of a walk while there’s still some light. Give an old lady a hand?’

She reached up.

It was almost dark by the time they returned to the beach, untied the boat and pushed it into the water. A southerly blew up. Felix clambered into the boat, shivering in wet shorts. Joyce lifted the oars and gestured.

‘Here, your turn,’ she said.

They stood and swapped places. Felix pulled them away from the shore and they soon moved out into the open water. The wooden oars turned smoothly in his hands and the splash of the oars filled the silence between them.

Joyce rummaged in the milk crate in the bottom of the boat.
‘Bugger! We’re supposed to have lights front and back. Let’s hope the water police have gone home for tea.’ She switched on a big Dolphin torch.

‘What’d you think about a quick detour? Can you wait a bit longer to read Jozef’s letters?’

‘If we make it short.’

‘Veer left. I’ll show you my other house.’

‘Your other house? You’re kidding.’

He pulled the boat around and rowed along parallel to the shore of the national park. A tinny chugged past two hundred metres away in the slow zone near the rocky shore in the direction of the point. When they were past the no-wash zone, the driver threw back the throttle and the boat sped away, nose in the air. Over by the island Felix saw the red and green lights of other boats moving across the water and heard the faint buzz of engines.

The wind dropped as they came around a rocky promontory, the dark bush towering above.

‘Here.’ Joyce switched turned the torch towards the land and they were wrapped in the moonclad dark.

He looked up to the place where Joyce’s weak torch beam pointed.

She tilted her head, gesturing in the air. ‘It’s a long and narrow block. Runs up the top of the rise. You just have to imagine.’

Felix strained his eyes to pick out the shape of the shore and the treeline.

‘What’s up there?’

‘Just a shack, nothing you could live in. Some plants I’ve brought over, too. Bush regeneration. Spotted gums, mainly. It’s a good bit of old bush up there.’
‘For when the hustle and bustle of island life gets too much?’

She laughed. ‘A wedding present, actually. That’s a story for another time. Come on, let’s go eat.’

Felix bent to the oars, the skin of his palms already succumbing to blisters. Joyce whistled in the prow and they pulled out slowly into the middle of the body of water between the national park and the island. The wind tossed them about and Felix felt the sweat collect on his forehead then turn icy. They slid forward in the dark. Felix felt his thoughts ease into a state of calm, in spite of the straining in his arms and chest. His breath came rhythmically. He thought about Jozef sitting under the bodhi tree, as Joyce had put it. Jozef was the last person you’d associate with some kind of spiritual quest. But the old man never stopped thinking about his place in the world, Felix thought. He considered the transcript and Jozef’s conviction about Daniel Faber. You didn’t meet too many people with a story like his father’s. What happened to a person when the thinking got too much?

He thought about his own life. His own tendency to retreat. He imagined Jozef walking on those thin brown legs.

He rowed them to Joyce’s jetty on the southern side of the island.

‘Got a lead, by the way,’ he said as they tied the boat up. ‘I met a woman who works at the gallery. Lena. I’m going to go and get a look at Daniel Faber myself. Tomorrow night.’

Joyce switched on the big torch and stood upright. In the darkness behind the bright torch beam, he thought he saw her shake her head.
Later, Joyce made lemongrass tea and brought it into the lounge room in one of her wonky teapots. Felix looked up from perusing the stack of art journals beside him on the little couch.

Joyce put the tea down on the rickety side table. ‘You can pour.’

She sat down. ‘You remind me of him, of course.’

Felix poured the fragrant, steaming tea. His arms were tired from the effort of rowing. Tonight he planned to read Jozef’s letters and the anticipation was making him tense. He tried to still the shake in his hands but knew it would just travel his body looking for another outlet — a tapping foot, a bobbing knee.

Joyce went on. ‘Jozef was a bit of a worrier. Never could get him to own up to it. Typical trauma stuff.’

‘But you got through to him.’ Felix leant forward. He cradled his cup.

‘I just persevered with your dad. Jollied him along when he froze. Never forced him to talk about things. I could always tell when he wanted to say something important but sometimes I had to read between the lines.’

Felix stood and walked to the front door, where he’d left his duffel bag. He unzipped it and pulled out the bundle of Jozef’s letters.

‘Ah, his letters,’ said Joyce. ‘They’re all about you, of course.’
Chapter 28

Lena watched Daniel as he made his way slowly, painfully, to the leather chair by the front door of the gallery. He winced with every step. She was aware that she was staring, but couldn’t help it. Felix’s visit had put a strange complexion on things. Who was Daniel Faber, really? Would she suddenly see a secret side to him?

Like that famous anamorphic skull in the Holbein painting, she thought. The one that looks like a weird streak in the foreground until you see it from the side. All a matter of viewpoint.

He chattered away to her breathlessly. ‘Fucking artists. Why say you’ll come at ten thirty if you’re not planning to make an appearance until bloody lunchtime? Look at that! It’s gone eleven. Get me the phone, will you dear? Martha has to get on with shifting her stuff out so we can get Paul’s in.’

She walked over to him, her heels clacking on the floorboards. It can’t be true, she thought. The boy in the barn. Jozef Fabin’s awful story, in the transcript. But she shuddered when her fingertips touched Daniel’s as he took the phone.

He peered up at her. ‘Hieronymous Bosch dance on your grave?’

‘Had a late night, that’s all.’ He was sharp as a butcher’s knife, even now, she saw.

‘How exciting. Good for you!’

‘Cup of tea?’ Her voice sounded faint.

‘Go make one for yourself. I’ll hold the hordes at bay.’

She retreated towards the corridor. Over her shoulder, she said: ‘You back looks bad. You should see your doctor.’
He grinned. ‘I did. It’s my heart he’s worried about. Broken, he says.’

The eyes twinkled, as always. ‘But that’s hardly news. Now, your job, my darling, is entertaining Paul while we deal with Martha.’

‘Babysitting?’ She paused in the doorway.

‘That’s why we pay you the big bucks.’

‘Ha ha. Do we have to stay here?’

‘For God’s sake no, get him out of here.’

She walked through the gallery to the back kitchen, filled a glass of water and drank it quickly. She would have to put Felix and the disturbing details of his father’s transcript out of her mind if she was going to make it through the day. I shouldn’t have come, she thought, leaning against the sink. I could have called in sick; why didn’t I?

Andrew came into the kitchen. ‘Out with the old, in with new, today.’

‘Hm.’ She gulped another glass and noticed that Andrew was hovering.

‘Yes?’

‘Fancy a drink later?’

‘Oh.’ She blinked back at him, her top lip wet.

He shrugged. ‘See how you feel.’ She stared after him as he went out the door.

Paul Collier arrived just as Martha and her long-haired boyfriend started arguing with the removalists about the safe handling of her artworks. Paul picked his way nimbly over the Styrofoam and bubblewrap to Lena’s side.

‘Hey!’ He was beaming.

‘Hey. I’m taking a celebrated artist out for lunch today.’
‘Oh. Ok.’
‘I meant you, idiot!’
‘Oh! Cool.’
‘You’re gunna meet a friend of mine. Let’s go.’

Gabriel had agreed to catch up during his lunch break. They met him at a tiny hole-in-the-wall Chinese dumpling restaurant in Kings Cross.

He looks tired, she thought, as she pecked Gabriel on the cheek and squeezed up next to him on the pine bench. Paul sat down opposite them, eyes scanning the room. She made introductions.

Gabriel patted her hand and grinned, mischief in his eyes. ‘Ma can’t wait to see you. Roll on Thursday.’

Flippant, casual Gabe. All hope faded that she might be able to share her encounter with Felix with him. The story was hardening into an uncomfortable nub inside her.

She frowned at Gabe. The quaint deception of their engagement didn’t seem fun anymore. ‘Stop it or I’m dobbing.’

‘And miss out on all those wedding presents?’ He reached across the table and poked her in the side.

‘You should tell them before they smoke you out, you goose.’

‘We’re working on it.’ He opened a bottle of sparkling water, which fizzed and spattered the tablecloth. The smug ‘we’ chafed.

Paul piped up. ‘Are you getting married? I’m getting married.’

‘No!’ Gabe rolled his eyes.

‘It’s a joke, Paul.’
‘Oh.’

Lena put her hand on Gabriel’s arm. She felt a quick bolt of affection for him. Dumplings arrived. Gabriel slid them onto plates and dispensed oil and vinegar.

‘And how’s Cristina?’ he asked.

‘Oh, she’s fine.’ She lied without a second thought. ‘Good actually. Could be turning over a whole new leaf.’

She smiled brightly. Gabriel stared back at her, quizzically. ‘For real?’

‘For real.’ She lowered her eyes to her plate.

‘Who’s Cristina?’ Paul asked, his mouth full of dumpling.

Gabriel wiped his mouth calmly. ‘She’s an alcoholic child abuser and parasite.’

Lena gaped at him. ‘Gabe!’

‘Well it’s true. Own up to it.’

She stood up, rage hissing in her head. ‘You can talk! Living such a perfect fucking lie.’

She felt a strange decoupling as the table, the restaurant, the onlookers receded. She picked up her bag and strode out the door.

Lena’s heels struck the Darlinghurst pavement hard as she walked. Paul caught up with her, breathless.

She cut him off. ‘I’m sorry. Forget what just happened. Let’s get you back.’
They walked in silence. Gabriel wasn’t the first to call Cristina names like that out loud but it hurt to hear it from him. She couldn’t help the tears; they came of their own accord, hot and silent.

After Lena’s teenage shoplifting fiasco Cristina received a notice telling them they had to attend the Children’s Court in Glebe. She and her mother dressed without talking the morning of the hearing, the nasty question of their future a wedge between them, pressing them apart.

Later, when she stepped out of the dark of the courtroom, blinking, Gabriel was there on the pavement leaning against the street sign, a little pile of cigarette butts at his feet. Hair full of mousse, just like Morrissey. They couldn’t talk properly until Cristina said goodbye and trotted off up the road, late and cursing, to her job in the kitchens of the Cricketer’s Arms.

Then he nudged her arm. ‘So?’

She’d shrugged. ‘Well I’m not in a kid’s home, am I?’

‘Not in jail either.’

She squinted up at him. The air was squeezed in her chest. ‘Your hair looks good.’

‘I picked up a hairdresser. He’s putting me in his folio.’

Now Gabriel was eighteen he could visit all those places he’d told Lena about. Ken’s Sauna. The Midnight Shift.

Then the people from the Department of Community Services came out of the building. A gingery woman in a red cardigan saw Lena and came over. She got out a pouch of rolling tobacco and rolled a cigarette, the little curls of tobacco scattering onto the pavement.

‘Your mum gone?’
Lena’s stomach tightened. ‘Yep.’

‘You know she nearly lost you that time. Lost you properly, I mean.’

Lena hung her head. The magistrate had even said it out loud: taken into permanent care. But they were getting one last chance, Lena and Cristina.

The woman accepted a light from Gabriel. ‘Look, there are safe places you can go if things ever get bad at home again. I can get you some information.’

Lena felt Gabriel’s eyes on her. ‘No.’

Then the woman shook her head and left. Lena’s legs had gone all numb and rubbery and she couldn’t talk for the wobble in her chin so she just stood there, looking away.

Gabriel twisted an upright strand of hair between thumb and finger. ‘Wanna go look in the Pleasure Chest again?’ he said.

‘Barf. No thanks, Pervin’ Mervyn. Anyway, I’ll get arrested for sure for being underage.’ She had a deep, long cry inside her — the kind you didn’t want anyone to hear, not even your best friend.

‘Wanna go to the David Jones foodhall?’

‘Not allowed. I got banned from there too.’

‘No way! How about we go listen to music in Ray’s?’

‘Ok.’

At that moment, she was more grateful to Gabe than she’d been to anyone in her life.

He took hold of her hand and led her along the street and told her all about the Five Best Moustaches in the World which were all at Ken’s Sauna last night. Which made her laugh, eventually.
She stood outside the gallery smoking a pilfered cigarette. She watched the sun going down over the terrace roofs opposite and tried to empty her mind.

When she went inside, she discovered Daniel asleep in the leather chair. Paul was ignoring her, displaying unaccustomed tact. Andrew was nowhere to be found. She went into the small gallery room opposite the main gallery. This was where Daniel housed the permanent collection of pieces he bought and sold. Paintings mostly, but odd pieces of sculpture and jewelry too.

She walked slowly around the room. At a glass-topped cabinet she examined a collection of ornate silver knives, museum pieces. She peered at a jet mourning brooch, a fine piece of Victorian gothic. Its facets caught the colours of her jacket and scarf.

She breathed deeply. She imagined the air had a stale quality in spite of the air conditioning. All of this stuff, she thought; who knows if any of it’s legitimate. Stolen art, war art — they say it all finds its way back into circulation eventually.

She turned her head from side to side, noticing the way the jet captured the colours.

‘Not to your taste, I expect.’

The shock nearly made her scream. She turned to the doorway. ‘Oh God Daniel, you frightened me half to death.’

‘No need for that.’ He shuffled over in his socks.

‘I like the brooch. It’s beautiful. But I wouldn’t have picked it as your kind of thing.’

‘I have no opinions of my own.’

‘Oh, bullshit.’
‘I buy what sells.’ He lifted his glasses from the chain around his neck and stared into the case.

‘Oh, yes,’ he said. ‘There’s a glass panel on the underside of that one for a photo of one’s dear departed. Morose lot, the Victorians. You’re right. Can’t abide this kind of thing myself.’

‘They liked to remember their dead. Natural, isn’t it?’

His laugh echoed in the little room. ‘Godsakes no! I say forget them, they’re dead aren’t they?’

You can talk, Lena wanted to say. Obsessed with a dead woman.

‘What are you looking for in here anyhow?’ he said lightly.

She shrugged, her eyes hooded. He looked at her squarely, his hand cupped over his chin.

‘The answer is yes,’ he said.

She stared back.

He gave a dismissive flick of his right hand. ‘Sometimes we buy without checking provenance. We have collectors with special tastes. It pays Andrew’s alimony.’

She shook her head. ‘How can you? People die, you know. Trying to keep things safe from looters.’

She’d heard about the emptying of the museum in Baghdad — it was the kind of story that filled you with rage.

‘Only to have the stuff looted by their countrymen.’

‘That’s no justification!’

He shrugged. ‘Most things have passed through every major European auction house before coming to us.’
‘So we don’t have to think for ourselves?’

‘You’re forgetting that nobody cares. People are greedy and fatuous.’

He turned away, irritated. She watched him shuffle back to the door, a hand on the waistband of his trousers. He turned at the doorway.

‘Oh, I nearly forgot. We’ll do a book, you and I. My tell-all biography.’

Her heart leapt in her chest for an awful second and she thought about Jozef Fabin and the barn. He wanted the truth to come out?

‘People love to hear about Valerie. Let’s give them everything. Before I die.’

He drew out the final words, chuckling. Ivan, his driver, met him in the hallway and led him towards the door.

Moments later, she heard Paul shout his goodbyes too. She walked into the bright reception room and stood in silence. Then she aimed a swift kick at the leg of her chair.

‘Mercy! I’m a defenseless chair! I can’t fight back!’

She jumped and turned to see Andrew, lounging against the wall, smirking. ‘Chair kicking. Quite a day, huh?’

‘I might take you up on that offer now.’

He gave her a surprised look. ‘A drink?’

‘Thought I might powder my nose. If you’ll oblige me.’

‘Oh, what fun!’

‘A drink would be good, too.’

‘Let’s raid the bar. Daniel won’t miss a bottle of champagne or two.’

‘I guess not.’ She followed him down the hall.

‘Let’s get high then I’ll show you my etchings.’
‘Don’t be a creep.’

‘Ok.’

It was dark. Lena fumbled the latch of the gate leading down the side path to her building. She stepped through and counted the stairs down to the path. Then she counted her footsteps along the path, which seemed catastrophically loud. As she turned the corner to her front door, she saw the moon, round and yellow as the yolk of an egg, bobbing in the sky.

A man stepped out onto the path, holding Magpie.

‘Oh, Jesus!’ She gasped and blinked back at him in alarm. She took two steps back.

His dark hair was patchy and cut close to his head. He had a rough beard. His clothes were shabby and torn but eloquent black eyes searched her face in the second before he handed her the cat.

‘Yours, I believe’ he said. His voice was deep, his accent rich and rolling.

He smiled and turned back down the path that led to the beach. She peered after him, incredulous. It was confusing. The darkness swallowed him suddenly, as if he’d fallen through a trapdoor into the underworld.

She steadied herself and gripped Magpie close as she unlocked the door of her flat. She flicked on the light, breathing the room’s closed-in smell.

There was the canvas, blank and white. A void; an invitation.
Chapter 29

Lena woke with a throbbing skull, to the unmelodious sound of her neighbour’s wind chimes. Her temple pulsed horribly. She imagined litres of blood behind the fragile bone, attempting to push its way out. Why had she been so stupid, giving herself a hangover on today of all days, when she had Paul Collier’s exhibition opening? Now she’d have Paul, the artist, nipping at her heels while she felt like carrying her head around in a bag.

The smell of oil paint hung thickly in the air, adding to her queasiness. She hardly dared roll over — what kind of a mess had she made of the canvas? The sun shone pink and warm against the wall beside her. She burrowed deeper under the covers and tried to ignore the pounding in her head.

Like trying to ignore waterboarding, she thought. Or dental extraction.

She avoided drugs usually — her happiness was too tenuous, too conditional to stand up to the punishment of come-downs on a regular basis. She examined a fingernail on her right hand. Using a nail from the other hand, she exhumed paint from beneath the hemisphere of nail. Blue, yellow. She sighed and a gust of nauseating wine fumes enfolded her. She closed her eyes again.

She’d followed Andrew into his office with a pounding heart.

He was chirpy. ‘Just want to be absolutely sure: should I make a pass at you later?’

‘Nope. Thanks for clarifying.’ She’d managed a dull-eyed smile. ‘I’ll remind you if I need to.’ He was sweating zealously.

Minutes later, he handed her the plate and straw. She saw his shaking hands, the nails all bitten down.

He smiled, a touch too widely. ‘You first.’
She took the straw and examined the fat white slugs of cocaine lined up side by side.

‘Much obliged.’ Here goes, she thought.

There it was: the instant burn and the numbing at the back of her nose. She straightened up. Her eyes watered. She licked her lips and sensed them already turning numb. ‘

Congratulations.’

‘What for?’

He shrugged. ‘Getting the job. You’ve noticed Daniel Faber hates me, then.’

‘Needs you too, right?’

‘Right. But there’s no gaining the upper hand with him. Better that you understand that now.’

Lena had felt a chill travel the back of her neck as she looked around the room. Andrew bent towards the plate. She picked up a photo from his desk in a neat silver frame — his sons in their sailing gear.

He straightened up, rubbing his nose. ‘Oh, them. Eleven and thirteen this year. You hardly notice the time past then — bam — they’re bloody teenagers.’

‘They take after you.’ They were stocky young men with eager smiles and their father’s eyes.

‘No. They’re better men than me.’

The statement — and its inference — hung between them for a long moment.

‘What have you done that’s so bad?’

‘Nothing so bad. Not in the scale of things.’
She caught his eye for a second. He nervously looked away and started tipping coke onto the plate again from a tiny plastic bag. Sweat beaded on his brow.

You had to feel sorry for a man who couldn’t see himself clearly, she thought.

She felt the cocaine buzz coming on, a feeling that started as a tingle in the back of her neck. She watched Andrew cut the lines with the side of his credit card.

A person like him would say something often enough and begin to believe it, she thought. The looted art, the relics changing hands, the dirty money. Whatever it was they got up to here at night. Nothing so bad.

Lena perched on the edge of the table and took a sip of the cheap red wine. It burned her throat. ‘What kind of art do you like, then?’

‘Shit, I dunno. Once you’ve been in the trade a while, you’ll know there are no straight answers to a question like that.’

‘But everyone has pet hates.’

‘Sure. Since you ask, I loathe nineteenth century European art.’

‘Well that cancels out most of the headline acts.’

‘Yep. Quite like Japanese stuff from the same era. Partial to modern ceramics and sculpture. If I had a big house and a packet of money, I reckon I’d go in for big chunky outdoor pieces. Iron, bronze, stone — that sort of thing. Art you can touch.’

‘Fancy yourself as a collector?’

‘Ha. Collectors are idiots mostly. Advisors do the hard part.’

‘People like you?’
‘People like me.’

She stood up and took her glass of wine to the window. His office overlooked the laneway they used to take big deliveries to the back entrance. He startled her.

‘Don’t forget that around here, the buyers make the artist. You have to get a following, chop-chop. Get your face on the cover of a magazine. Join the festival circuit, release a book. Mouth off in the press, do a few stunts. That’s what being an artist means these days.’

‘Is Paul Collier the next big thing?’

‘Yeah, probably.’

‘Lord save us.’ She rolled her eyes.

‘Uh huh. Another line?’

‘Think I’d better.’

Then they started drinking.

She left him there, still in the gallery office, at about one in the morning, twiddling the dials of the old analogue radio, looking for a rock and roll station. She took off her shoes and jogged home through the park, the grass springy under her feet — going barefoot was foolish and walking alone was dangerous but she felt alert, capable — and wondered why everything in her life seemed to suddenly be moving fast and tugging her along. She was all heart and guts and scar. Then tears, too, as she started to come off the high, stepping more slowly, more quietly, in the inky shadows of the Moreton Bay fig trees.

At home, she pulled out the paints, the image that she wanted to paint as clear as anything in her mind, decided before she’d even squeezed paint onto the palette. She worked furiously, drank another bottle of wine while she was at it
then, at 4 am, as the first glimpse of day tinged the sky, she collapsed onto the sofa, exhausted. That coke, bloody hell, she’d thought. Imagine: you could get a collection together in a weekend.

Then she vomited twice before stumbling to bed and falling into a deep and troubled sleep.

Now she turned away from the wall to look at the canvas. In the centre of it, there was a body — an extruded version of her own body, long and pale — sliced from neck to navel. She had painted a twisted rope of eviscerated bowel that became cut-out paper dolls, holding hands. In the background a gun, levelled at the figure’s head. Overhead, the sky held up by the rafters of a barn.

It was not at all beautiful. But she didn’t hate it.

She sat up. The world lurched. Something caught the corner of her eye and she noticed a pinched little face at the window. The shock almost made her shriek. The door opened and Cristina’s head appeared, hair cut short as a boy’s.

‘Surprise!’ Cristina’s eyes were big with studied remorse. ‘Oh my God, Lena, you look terrible.’

Cristina’s eyes widened further as she stepped into the room. ‘You’re hungover!’ She rummaged in her handbag and handed Lena a packet of painkillers.

‘No need to shout.’ Her mother’s voice wrung her brain like a wet sponge.

‘I’ll get you water.’ Cristina turned to the sink and fished in her bag for her glasses. She’s actually enjoying this, thought Lena, mortified. Hangovers are her specialty.
Cristina took a glass from the crowded draining board and filled it. She handed the water to Lena, who took it gingerly.

‘What are you doing here?’ asked Lena. Here it comes, she thought dryly, gulping two pills with the cold water. One of Cristina’s peacemaking speeches, the ones she rehearses in the pub with her twelve-step mates.

But Cristina held her glasses in one hand and looked down at the scuffed toes of her K-mart sandals.

‘Mama?’

Cristina folded the glasses and put them into her bag. ‘Been getting some counselling. Therapy — that’s what they call it in New York. Therapy schmerapy, y’know?’

She gave a brittle laugh and tossed her head, as if she’d forgotten about the brutal haircut.

‘Uh huh. So?’

‘Name’s Caroline. From social services. Reckons I should stay out of your way for a bit. Give you a break.’

‘You mean you have to cut ties with me?’ Lena was familiar with the AA rhetoric. She felt her guts turn molten.

‘Caroline says you’re enabling me to drink.’

The anger hit Lena like a heat wave. ‘Oh please! I enable you to live after you’ve tried to drink yourself to death, you mean. I enable you to not be homeless or hungry or alone. Who is this woman?’

Lena heard the conversation in her mind: *Is your daughter part of your problem? Cut her loose. Do this for yourself, Cristina. Save your own life.*

‘But you’ve been drinking, Lena. Look at you.’
‘Mama, come on. It’s not the same thing. Don’t make out that it is.’

Cristina folded her arms and let out a sigh. ‘I’ve been an idiot. I don’t blame you if you’ve run out of patience with me.’

‘Did Caroline get you to practise that line?’ Lena surprised herself with the venom in her voice.

She swung her legs out of bed and stood up. She reached for her bathrobe and wrapped it quickly around her naked body. She avoided meeting her mother’s gaze. If she caught Cristina’s eye, she might be tempted to stick a fork in it. The pixie hair cut made Cristina look tiny but it didn’t hide the lines on her face and scrawny neck.

Lena ran a hand through her own long and tangled hair. ‘You should go.’

‘I should.’ Cristina turned.

Wait, I want the old script, Lena thought unsteadly. I want to pull that old bag of bones over here and tell her it’s alright. Listen to the same old apologies she dishes out every time. Give her the same assurances.

Cristina looked over to the canvas. ‘You did a painting?’

She looked at Lena with sadness, then turned and walked quickly, shoulders hunched, out the door.

Lena followed her out to the path, the bathrobe clutched to her body.

‘Mama!’

Panic rose in her chest — a feeling as old and deadly as any she could remember. Her mind went blank for a moment. She went back inside and leant on the cold sink. Her mother was gone.
Well Gabe’ll be rapt, she thought numbly, her hands turning icy on the
sink’s metal rim. A lump formed in her throat. She switched on the kettle and
listened to it hiss.

Through the wall her neighbour cranked up the stereo: Dolly Parton,
*Here you come again*. She groaned and shook her aching head. Ken’s flatmate
Perry was practicing his drag number again. She heard his size eleven high heels
rapping out step-ball changes.

Why not just come over, she thought, and take a mallet to my skull?

She lay down on the bed and closed her eyes.

She woke an hour later and sat up. She regarded herself in the wardrobe mirror.
A brief image of Felix crossed her mind. She recognized something of herself in
him: a loner’s instinct, a certain rawness. Oh God, did she fancy him? He would
be coming past the gallery tonight to Paul’s launch. She felt a tiny lurch in the pit
of her stomach at the thought of seeing him again.

She put the thought out of her mind and slipped the robe off her shoulder
and examined the scar in the mirror next to the bed. She ran her fingertip along it
and turned towards the light.

She’d got the scar from a man called Darren. He and Cristina had been
together for a month and Lena knew from the start that it was bad. They were on
the piss most nights and Darren would get shouty. He’d turned violent late at
night too, although Cristina learned to hide the bruises well enough. Lena hated
him. If she’d known Gabriel then, she might have enjoyed hating someone as
much as she hated Darren. She knew Gabriel loved a vendetta. But Darren came
along in the loneliest year of her life, when things couldn’t have been worse. Until, of course, they were.

She was thirteen, thin and pale as a new moon.

It was New Year’s Eve, hot as a furnace and everyone was mean, as if there wasn’t enough air in the whole of Sydney to go around. Lena had been pestering to go to the beach but Darren was too drunk by midday to drive them and the afternoon wore on so Lena watched telly in his rented Hornsby apartment and ate Cheezels instead. At least they were going out for the night; she had that to look forward to.

They got on the train from Darren’s and went to Bradfield Park under the Harbour Bridge, like every other poor sucker on the north shore. Lena sulked and wandered about looking for other kids to watch the fireworks with then drifted back to the old picnic blanket to find Darren in a stand-up argument with another man.

Darren was pink as a Christmas ham and there was a film of sweat on his face. You could smell him: all beer and anger, a broken bottle in his hand. Lena saw Cristina on the other side of him and panic flared in her chest. She took a step.

Darren didn’t mean to cut Lena; he was so pissed he staggered, and he couldn’t avoid her when she lunged for her mother. It was as bad as it could have been, a slash from elbow to shoulder, a messy knot of flayed flesh at the top. When the artery was slashed, the blood sprayed three feet into the air, like a horror film. She immediately passed out.

Microsurgery and thirty stitches. She could have died from the blood loss alone; she only found out how close she came when the hospital social worker
came to tell her she wasn’t going back to Cristina. She was going to foster parents.

Bill and Georgette Kemp had her for six months in their Strathfield home. Over the years, Lena had forced herself to remember as little of that time as possible. The place smelled of dogs. They took her to the children’s hospital to have her dressings changed and for her counselling appointments. She went to the little hospital school where she did craft and read science books and stared at the hairless cancer kids.

At home things were quiet. The couple were kind and dull. Bill was a sleepwalker. Some mornings Lena found him on the carpet in front of the telly, prone like a dead man and snoring loud as a herd of bellowing cows. Don’t wake him, Georgette told her. He might hit. Or bite.

Lena stared at the man’s cracked heel, at the white ankle protruding from the gaping striped pyjamas. When her time was up and social services took her back to Cristina, Lena discovered what her mother was like sober: dry as a husk and cut to ribbons with regret.

At length, she got out of bed, showered and chose a vintage silk dress, cinched at the waist with a little fabric belt, in a smudgy floral pattern. White stockings and white vintage heels.

She finished dressing and looked at her watch; it was nearly 11.30 am. She peered into the fridge and took out a tub of yoghurt and ate it standing at the sink. It made her feel better so she reached for a second.

She leant against the sink. As she licked the yoghurt spoon, she remembered the quizzical look on Felix’s face as he’d stepped out of the hire car
on Bondi Road. He was good looking, certainly. And as far as she could tell, quite sane.

She reapplied her lipstick, taking rather more care than usual.
Chapter 30

Felix woke on Joyce’s couch and sat up. He glanced about for the box of Jozef’s letters that Joyce had set aside for him. It was there on the floor, two feet away.

In the kitchen, he found some bread and a scribbled note from Joyce:

*Gone to the bays. Fire threat in the National Park.*

He sawed off a chunk of bread and carried it to the balcony. A thin, dark plume of smoke rose from the trees behind the ridge above Joyce’s bushland haven. He guessed it was a small fire; perhaps they already had it under control. He chewed the hunk of bread, imagined Joyce over there, doing whatever it took to protect her little gum trees and her shack.

At the height of summer, Joyce had told him, every scorching day prepared the parched bushland a little better for a blaze that could swallow up the island and the bays. A crown fire could leap the waterways in the high winds, she said.

Joyce looked off the veranda and down into the garden.

‘We’ll be just a pathetic flotilla of lost souls watching paradise burn from our banged up tinnies.’

‘Sounds pretty drastic.’

‘Oh, it’ll happen one day. All we’ll have left is the fucking carpark.’

‘Build a shanty town there, at least.’

‘I just hope I have time to get the art off the walls. If I have to start again, I’m going to want my pictures.’

Felix went back into the kitchen and made two rough pieces of toast. Then he carried the toast back to the lumpy couch, dragged the scratchy blanket over his legs and reached for the box of Jozef’s letters. He recognised his father’s
handwriting on the first of the envelopes and felt a twinge. Letter writing, Christ. The practice belonged to a distant past. It was typical that Jozef should have held on. These days you could say everything you needed in 140 characters or less to a virtual world waiting for your ‘tweet’ — even the word made Felix shudder. Were we all songbirds now?

He reached into the box and opened the first of the letters. From its yellowed appearance, Felix saw it was an old one, although it had no date.

Dear Joyce,

Thanks for the letter. Is your little piece of heaven thriving? We are all recovering from winter colds and hope we’ll see some indication of spring soon. The garden has given us no sign that it is yet ready for the new season.

Daniel celebrated his tenth birthday last weekend. I took him fishing in Brighton, which became something of a disaster — he cut his hand with a scaling knife and fainted from the blood, poor sod. There were stitches and tears, of course. I hope he takes a lesson from it. He was so angry with me afterwards, I had no idea why.

It is hard not to always be scolding. In my head we’re always just a heartbeat away from the disaster that will tear us apart. I mean, a cut to the hand is the smallest of things. But accidents do set the teeth on edge. Children don’t understand the world’s abundant potential for mishaps or tragedy; nor should they. It is my struggle, to wake up every morning and not feel overwhelmed by the potential for awful things to happen to us.

I wonder if Dan knows it, too. For so long he had that stutter, you know. His words still stick in his throat sometimes.
Felix’s hand flew to his mouth — to his old, invisible injury. He remembered how he used to imagine a torrent of words flowing out of him in the direction of his father, saying all the unsaid things. Later, when he was older, he had imagined himself shouting at Jozef. Soon after that, he recalled, he hadn’t even bothered imagining.

He read on.

Perhaps I’ve made it my gift to him, this contagion of worry and fear. I should be ashamed of myself. I hope he will forgive me someday.

Felix put the letter down. He understood Jozef’s urge to control everything: it was natural that a man with his experiences might try to protect every aspect of his world.

I hope he will forgive me someday.

He reread the line. He should have shown Jozef that none of it mattered. That he would have accepted his father’s love in any form.

The letter continued:

Anyway, enough of these maudlin things. How is your work coming along? I should very much like to see some pictures of your new pieces.

Best,

Jozef.

He folded the first letter, replaced it and took out another.

Dear Joyce,

Thank you for the pictures. The gallery owner who took your work is called Daniel Faber?

Felix’s heart skipped.
Very interesting; it’s so close to my brother’s name. And to my son’s, of course, who is named for my brother.

I have to go to a lecture now but sending you my congratulations on your show and best wishes. I enclose a drawing by Daniel.

Jozef

Felix unfolded the enclosed sheet. It was a fine drawing of a dissected flower, something he had produced in a biology class. He smoothed it out. It was a little smudged but it was an intricate piece, neatly crosshatched and signed in childish hand on the bottom. He smiled and folded it again. Why didn’t he draw anymore? He would show it to Joyce later.

He took another small bundle from the box; a letter, bound to several postcards by an old elastic band. He peeled the letter from the bundle and looked at the postmark. It was sent in November 1989 from somewhere called Lightning Ridge. From the date, Felix guessed it was from just before Jozef came back to England. He took the folded sheets from the old envelope with anticipation.

Dear Joyce,

I must begin with an apology: I let you down very badly as I’ve let others down. I also hope you received my postcards as the sign they were meant — a signal to you that you shouldn’t worry. I hope this finds you well, and it is my sincerest wish that my troubles have not added to yours.

I am writing to ask for your help. I need to return to England. I have money, in English accounts. My brothers can also be relied on to pay for a ticket. I am writing to you from Lightning Ridge and I’m without means to make this happen myself so must respectfully ask that you make contact with my family so they can arrange a flight home for me.
I can receive letters post restante at Lightning Ridge post office.

Thank you, immeasurably

Jozef.

He put the letter down in his lap and reached for the postcards. The old elastic band frayed and broke, and the cards scattered from his lap and onto the couch. He turned the first card over, then the second. Then he quickly spread all of them out on the cushions of the couch. Each of them was blank.

Felix sat back. He was baffled. He lifted the first postcard and turned it again, to look at the photograph. It was a picture of a tall minehead on a hill overlooking a town. A blue, baking sky. It bore the words Greetings from Broken Hill in curly yellow writing. He examined the postmark. The date, in red ink, was still decipherable: 6 July 1989. He turned the cards over and laid them out into a line, in order of dates: Broken Hill, Port Augusta, Coober Pedy, Alice Springs, Mount Isa, Long Reach, Lightning Ridge.

Felix shook his head. They were place-names from a made-up story. And Jozef hadn’t written a single word about what he was doing out there, in those strange places. It was maddening.

He stood and whistled for Jake the dog, who appeared, tottering, at the back door. He strode barefoot out to the overgrown back garden and took the steps leading down to the water two at a time. Jake shuffled along behind, panting from the effort.

The old grey jetty extended out across the low-tide mud. Felix walked along it, stepping carefully to avoid the sagging, broken planks. He jumped down to Joyce’s pontoon and sat on the edge. There was an inch or two of water left
under the pontoon. Jake stared down at him mutely then dropped onto the planks
of the jetty, his old hips accomplishing the task with difficulty.

Felix’s moment of quiet was interrupted by a whistle from a neighbouring
jetty.

‘Hey mate, you got a minute?’

Felix looked around. To his left, Joyce’s neighbour was shin-deep in the
mud, hands under the rim of a narrow wooden tender. He was a stout man with
springy grey hair like a scourer and a face red from sun. The pretty boat lay on a
slight lean, up to her rudder in mud. She was smartly painted and varnished, her
hull a handsome black with a red stripe.

Felix got to his feet, stepped down into the oozing sand and made his way
across to the neighbouring jetty.

‘Got to get her onto the pontoon. Missed the tide. Thanks a lot.’

Felix hooked his hands under the boat’s rim on the opposite side. ‘Say
when.’

‘Orright, upadaisy.’

They lifted together. The weight of the boat came as a shock. They edged
sideways in the sucking mud.

‘Anti-fouling, bloody awful job. Scraping the shell off, you know. Matt’s
the name, by the way.’

‘Felix.’ He felt the muscles in his shoulders begin to strain. At last, they
hoisted one rim of the boat on the edge of the pontoon.

‘Ok, time to flip it. Hold her steady.’
Matt climbed up and took the far side of the boat and they lowered it carefully upside down. The bottom of the boat bore a blue-grey mass of sharp oysters.

‘Now if you don’t mind.’ Matt lifted the edge of the boat and handed Felix a wooden block to push underneath. They made their way around the rim, raising the boat.

‘Selling her, see,’ Matt said.

‘She’s a beauty.’

‘Sure is. Made her myself. Called her The Tilly Devine, after a famous Sydney madam. Tilly used to bring her worn out ladies up here to holiday, back in the old days.’

‘Yeah?’

‘Set you back three ton. Bargain.’

‘Three ton?’ Felix gave Matt a quizzical look.

‘Three thousand.’ Matt said. He gave a sunsplit smile.

Felix laughed. ‘If I need a boat, I’ll be back.’

‘Even if you don’t. Dare say I owe you a beer.’

‘Will do.’

Felix called to Jake and his heart felt lighter as he waited at the shore for the dog to complete his slow journey back along the jetty. He led the old dog gradually up the steps.

Joyce was in the kitchen when Felix came through the back door. He called to her. ‘You win?’

He could smell the smoke on her clothes.
She turned to him, mouth full of toast. ‘You bet, young man. Up here, we’re on a fire before it even draws breath.’

He joined her in the kitchen.

She nodded at the couch, where the letter and postcard were scattered.

‘What about you? Been reading the letters?’

‘Yeah. Trying to understand.’

‘Maybe there’s nothing to it.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Jozef had to go and sort himself out. Get away. Have you never thought about it yourself? You know, pissing off. Dropping out.’

Felix stared at the dirty floorboards. ‘Not as a real option.’

‘But you’ve imagined it? You’ve thought about what it might be like, to become invisible for a time, go bush? To go where you’re completely unknown? Because I have.’

‘It’s a fantasy.’

‘That depends,’ she said ‘on how desperate you are.’

‘Couldn’t he have talked to someone?’ More than anything, he hated to think of his father being so alone. Given the choice, his twelve-year-old self would sooner have been a part of his father’s breakdown than lose him the way he did.

Joyce shook her head. ‘Before you think it, you couldn’t have done anything. You were a kid.’

‘I’ll think it anyway.’

‘Hey. It was Jozef’s business. No-one could put the past straight for him. Pardon the cliché but some things you have to work out alone. Anyway, the
minute he left London he was bound to change. It was such a mad thing to do. Any decisions he made after that, however extreme they seem now, were small in comparison to that first decision.

‘He didn’t come back for nearly six months!’

‘Australia’s a big country. It can take some time to find your way back to civilization, if you’ve worked at getting away from it.’ She smiled. ‘But he came back, eventually. Was he happier afterwards?’

He reflected. ‘He was calmer.’

‘So. He put something right. Come on, let’s get Matty to give you a lift to the mainland.’
Chapter 31

The black and white cat climbed into Yasir’s lap and sniffed at his dirty clothes. He’d heard her soft tread in the night, felt her warmth press in beside him in the cave. Not long after dawn she woke him with her girlish purring and nuzzling. She was soft as velvet. She fitted neatly into the crook of his arm.

He pulled her towards him now. He was still under the blankets, huddling in the dark cave. Voices reached him from the path above. Such a busy lot, always jogging back and forth, accumulating so many restless, pointless miles. He pulled the tarpaulin aside and squinted into the sun. He’d been a walker too, he reminded himself. It didn’t pay to judge. He rubbed the bony ridge at the base of the cat’s head and she closed her eyes. He closed his against the glare. Saints alive, what he wouldn’t do for a pair of sunglasses.

He and Ahmad shared a cat when they were boys. She was a thin stray who’d appeared at the bins one night with three kittens trailing after her. The kittens were given away (or drowned, who knows) but she stayed. He fed her with meat from his own plate until she was so spoiled his mother called her ‘Princess’. He called her simply Cat, because he feared that a name might bring down bad luck on the relationship. As soon as he made a claim to her, she’d be off again. But she remained and developed a reputation for loyalty and stubbornness. She was still alive, creaking and arthritic, her purr rattling like a faulty motor, when he departed for his undergraduate study in Kabul.

Both of his parents died, quietly, while he was away at Cambridge, in 2007. Your mother died of a broken heart, Farah told him. You belong to someone else now. The Dean took him aside and gently issued the solemnest of warnings. It was far too dangerous to attend the funerals, he would be risking his
life. So he went to the Abu Bakr Jamia Mosque in town instead and prayed for forgiveness. He wasn’t even sure where he should send his prayers.

Ahmad’s taunts escalated until he became relentless. Heated phone conversations took place every other day. Big man from the university, Ahmad said. Every day I sandbag your father’s house. I tape the windows. But you sit there doing nothing.

Leave it, Farah had said. Leave him be. He’s angry and jealous.

Then less than a year later she was taken from him too. The ectopic pregnancy made her death his fault, according to her parents. The extraordinary losses left him speechless. A year before he’d claimed two families as his own; now he saw that luck can be cruel and that people are impossible, irrational. He was alone and frightened.

He left Cambridge with a sorry heart, to seek out his brother. Now that their parents were gone, he knew Ahmad would criticise him for the things their father had held in such esteem — Yasir’s education, his interest in literature. These were indolent pastimes to Ahmad. Indulgences. Yasir feared his brother’s derision. He thought he would scarcely be able to bear it. But he must try. To his surprise, with Farah gone he felt the pull of home.

He took the dangerous journey home in a fog of homesick yearning, thinking of Farah every moment and hoping to be soothed by the place of his boyhood. He saw immediately after his arrival into the war-ravaged city of Kandahar, and onto his home town, that Ahmad was deluded. There was no saving the house. Fighting went on in the towns nearby and the roads were unsafe day or night. Explosions and gunfire shook the panes of the windows five, six, seven times a day.
He gathered the courage to confront Ahmad. He told him they must leave the damned house and go back to England together. They could fly the very next day, why not?

Ahmad’s face had reddened with rage. Lazy naadaan, he had shouted. Idiot! Later that night, Yasir listened to the sounds of his brother moving drunkenly around the house. He heard Ahmad sob and shout at the walls. When he could stand it no longer, he got up from his bed in the downstairs living room and went into the bright kitchen. His mother’s bunches of herbs and plastic net bags of spices, he noticed, were still hanging from the window frame, now covered in dust. A wide crack had opened in the plaster above the cupboards; there was concrete dust on every surface. The place was falling to the ground. Ahmad was seated at the table, his back to the door. Yasir heard the strike of a match.

‘Now go,’ Ahmad boomed to the room, without turning to face Yasir. ‘Walk like a shepherd boy over the hills. Retreat like a beaten dog.’

Yasir rounded the corner of the table and saw that Ahmad had set something on fire on a dinner plate in the centre of the kitchen table. Yasir took a step closer; it was Yasir’s British passport that Ahmad had set alight. Ahmad thrust out his arm. Yasir didn’t attempt to pass.

The following morning, Ahmad watched from the second story window of their father’s house as Yasir dragged his suitcase down the uneven steps. Yasir turned to see the resolute set of his brother’s jaw through the cracked glass. He heard the explosion and then, a half-second later, he felt the impact and caught a burning glimpse of that yellow-grey sky. His first life came to an end and he
began his second life as a man who belonged to no-one and who could not remember his own name. He joined the stateless people.

‘Hey Doc, still in bed?’

Yasir craned his head around the lip of the little cave. ‘If you can call it that.’

He watched Robbie step gingerly over the puddles on the rocks.

‘Glass half full, mate.’ Robbie raised his hand in a jovial greeting.

‘Back so soon?’ Yasir rubbed his eyes.

‘Brought you breakfast this time. Or early lunch, depending on how look at it.’

Yasir lowered his legs over the side of the small cave and dropped to his feet beside Robbie. He felt stiff. And, good heavens, he needed a bath. He imagined the austere bathrooms at the shelter. Glass half full.

‘Here you go.’ Robbie handed him a burger, still in its paper wrapper.

Yasir sat down on the rock. McDonalds. In another lifetime, he would have shuddered at the thought. ‘Most grateful.’

‘Where you from then doc?’

‘All about.’ He shrugged.

‘No, originally.’

‘Near Kandahar. A small town. Probably nothing left now.’

‘When did you leave there?’

Yasir laughed. ‘I was always leaving there, my friend. The last time I went back was in 2008. My wife had died in England so I went back to the village. It nearly cost me my life that time.’
Robbie frowned, apparently doing calculations. ‘Where’ve you been, then?’

‘Oh, all about.’ Yasir glanced back at the cave and thought of the snake in the rock. Where had he been? That God-forsaken family house. The Pakistani military hospital, where no-one knew his name and where his habit of silence began, in the compound where soldiers came and went. Then another evacuation to a better hospital on the advice of the surgeons: onto a long train across the centre of Pakistan, where his shoes were stolen but his money, tucked in his underpants, stayed mercifully safe. Then another dusty refugee camp, far from home on the eastern side of the country, where he began to recover; and where, when he finally had the strength to think about the future, he lay awake at night and wondered if it was better to die than undertake the journey he had begun to contemplate.

Perhaps he could have saved himself, he thought now. Perhaps he might have tried to come to his senses and call his friend the Dean. But he did not. His brain was swollen and for the longest time, he was unable to think properly. Most days, when the supply was good, he was given drugs, which he took with thanks, then he lay all day in the gritty camp cot in the first aid enclosure, dreaming of his dead wife. He thought of Farah and the taste of her mouth after Juicy Fruit chewing gum. Her eyes after crying, so clear.

‘I meant to go back to England,’ he said simply. The waves roared over the edge of the rock ledge.

‘Pardon?’

‘I meant to go back to England. But I was injured. I got confused. I had no passport. No papers.’
Yasir tapped the side of his head. He could not explain to a man like Robbie that he had become desperate — as desperate as a person can be. That his options had seemed to shrink as the months passed in the camp. He could not say that as he had recovered, he had heard the rumours in the camp and that he had made up his mind to find out if the rumours were true.

Men could help you. You could get a plane to Indonesia. You could join a boat. How could he tell Robbie, this kind young man, that he threw his lot in with criminals? That he had paid good money, all of the money that remained available to him, for a passage on a craft — if you could call it that — with an engine that threw evil smoke for the entire treacherous journey to Christmas island? Yasir suppressed a sigh. The thought of his poor decisions made him tired.

‘Educated man like you. I don’t get it,’ Robbie said.

Yasir shrugged. ‘Terrible things happen.’

‘Terrible like what?’

‘You’re young, it’s better you don’t know.’

‘You’re right. I’ll just cry.’

‘Ha.’

‘Try me, Doc.’

Yasir fell silent. What he wanted Robbie to know was that things sometimes take you away from your path. But you learned to adapt.

‘I met certain people, you know,’ he said at last. He could not find the words he needed. ‘People moving in the same direction as me. Birds of the same migration.’

‘Birds?’
‘Yes.’

They fell into silence again, watching the sea.

Robbie sneezed, breaking their reverie. ‘Bastard southerly. Gives me allergies.’ He pulled open his backpack. ‘Chocolate. Other things too. Razors and soap for when you come to the shelter.’ He handed the things to Yasir.

Yasir tore open the wrapper of the chocolate bar and offered it to Robbie.

‘Ta.’

He stood up and reached into the black recess of his cave. The paperback was a little damp. He handed it to Robbie. ‘Here.’

‘Keep it. I’m writing one myself.’

‘Really?’

‘Yeah. A sci-fi thriller in a future world.’

‘Robbie, you’re a man of hidden depths.’

‘Piss off.’

‘I prefer poetry.’

‘Really? Never understood much about poetry.’

Yasir smiled. ‘I catch an eastwind fragrance every morning. I see the point of unity in all creation, with no why or how. I see poor philosophy so far from reality. I see that my fancy images fail. But to whom shall I say what’s left?’ You see? The poets know that a story needs an audience. Who to tell, when everyone has gone?’

‘Tell Ahmad,’ Robbie said.

‘Yes, I suppose I should.’ Yasir managed a smile in return. Robbie was quite right. ‘Is it really him? My brother?’

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1 Hafiz ‘I see’ The Hand of Poetry New York: Omega Publications 1993, 162.
Robbie squinted up at the sky. ‘You tell me. The man speaks no English. But the translator tells me the same thing over and over: that he wants to say sorry.’

Yasir collected his things one by one: the blue tarpaulin, the overcoat, the length of rope. Then he laid out his clutch of other treasures: the knife, a pen. He sat on the rock and put on his shoes. The cat stretched ostentatiously and dropped quietly off the rock ledge to sniff the sea breeze then changed her mind and clambered back up to the path to watch his departure.

He remembered his wife. Her body in the morgue in Great St Mary’s in Cambridge. He remembered saying goodbye in English, then cursing.

We’re losing our voices, she’d said to him once. Speak to me the old way. So he had touched a fingertip to her cold cheek and said his farewell: *as-salaamu 'alaykum.*

Now he went to the cave and traced his finger along the carved curl of the snake’s back and repeated the phrase.
Chapter 32

Daniel hauled himself up the gallery steps in the early morning darkness. It was cold; he should have planned for that. He was distracted: something, he couldn’t say what, had prompted him to remember a long-ago trip to a factory in Germany where they made top quality oil paints. Cadmium, phthalo blue, viridian, cerulean: the names of the colours were full of secret meaning to the oil painter.

And the whites, thought Daniel, catching his breath. A good painter knows about white, about its use and misuse. Knows, too, about flesh tones. Without a touch of blue and green, the painted flesh looks dolly-like and candied.

It had been a long time since he’d attempted to climb the gallery stairs unassisted. Needs must, he thought, pausing halfway while his heart hammered against his ribs. He pictured the organ, enlarged and grotesque.

He resumed the climb more slowly, leaning on his stick.

Once he was inside the gallery, he lowered himself unsteadily into the leather chair by the door and closed his eyes, listening to his own ragged breath.

Did anyone actually care about oil paints anymore? There was Paul Collier, of course. But he’s running his own race, that boy, he thought, brushing a bead of sweat out of his eye. Not many like him. These days it’s all rock and roll stunts and reality television, not painting. Diamonds on a titanium skull, fifty million pounds worth. Sexy, glittering, desirable death.

See? I should have thought to use that as an example, he thought, when Lena and I were talking.

He shifted in the seat to prevent the waistband of his trousers from digging into his middle. He coughed. Static in the old pipes. He’d read that
Damien Hirst had rejected bids from collectors: the artist wanted his skull to sit alongside the ancient treasures of the British Museum.

Ready-made history, thought Daniel. What arrogance. That man’s most confronting act is to attach such an enormous price tag to everything he does.

He grunted his disapproval to the dark and empty room. It occurred to him that some fool of an architect had put all the light switches for the front rooms along the back wall of the gallery. He would need to haul himself up again and shuffle to the switch or sit in darkness.

Or not. He would sit here in the gloom next to Lena’s desk until the daily post arrived.

When did it become Lena’s desk? My desk, he thought. I own it.

He yawned. Poets and artists all love the dawn, he thought. The miracle of the new day, the opportunities for metaphysical inspiration, etcetera. Better be a good dawn. Worthy of a few adjectives, at least.

He woke to the sound of the letters thumping onto the mat through the slot in the door. He wiped spittle from the corner of his mouth and blinked. The day had long since begun; he checked his watch. Good gracious, a quarter to eight. He stretched his arms in front of him: he felt like a changed man. When was the last time he’d had three hours of such deep and luxurious sleep?

He stood and limped over to the pile on the mat. As he’d hoped, the letter from Jeremy had arrived. He used his stick to balance himself as he bent to pick it up. He tore it open and scanned the content of the first page quickly.

Jeremy had carried out Daniel’s instructions. In the nineties, when his enterprise had expanded, Daniel had made sure that he retained financial control
of the gallery, despite engaging an advisory board. As Jeremy’s letter indicated, the redirections of cash from the gallery accounts had taken place just as Daniel had requested. The beneficiaries were named in a virtuous list: UNICEF, Amnesty, the Children’s Hospital and various others. The trust account had been emptied. At Wednesday’s meeting the fur would fly, when the board discovered that Daniel’s acts of charity had left the place broke.

He smiled. They gallery would recover. If he had breached his executive duties then it was, he thought, a victimless crime — and a crime that would result in a great deal of benefit to some needy folk.

There wasn’t much time. He wanted to take a good look at Paul’s pictures in the peace and quiet — he owed the young man that. He made his way slowly to the main gallery room.

He still remembered the first time Valerie had had her own solo show. They hand-delivered the invitations themselves, to save on the cost of stamps. She got wildly drunk at the party, spilt wine down the front of her cream cashmere sweater.

But that sort of behaviour was expected from artists in those days, he thought, chuckling. Now they seem to come with media training. Or all their flaws quite hidden, he thought.

Valerie once told him that she thought Western cultures had no knack for ceremony. We’re all so fucking restrained about things, she said. Life events, the good and the bad. Why not examine them, dig them over, applaud them for being the markers of existence they were! She insisted, for instance, on a celebration after her abortion. Daniel agreed to it, although he would have preferred to get the job done and never to speak of it again. The day before her appointment at
the secret clinic, they took the train down to Luna Park and bought strawberry ice
cream cones.

‘It’ll all be better tomorrow,’ she’d told him. The little intruder would be
gone. She was giggly and excited. Her elegant two-piece suit hid the tell-tale
swelling.

He looked for a note of bitterness in her voice, a hint of apprehension, but
there was none. He realised that no part of her wanted a baby. She would have no
regrets. He scarcely dared examine his own feelings about having a child —
anyway, it was decided.

She was still happy that night when he took her to the shuttered house in
Gladesville. She kissed him goodbye passionately. He was expected to leave and
when he protested, he was ushered outside into the dusty yard to sit alone in the
dark under the ailing fig tree. He listened for screams but he heard nothing
except the chatter of the fruit bats overhead.

An hour later, one of the women, who all seemed alarmingly young,
came out to tell him that he could wait here another half an hour and then he
should go inside, help Valerie up and take her home. He would find her in the
front bedroom. Valerie should stay in bed for a day, at least.

‘What if she needs a doctor?’ he’d asked. He had heard stories about
things going wrong afterwards.

The young woman shrugged. ‘Take her to the hospital. She knows what
to say.’

Two other shadowy figures joined her from the back door of the house.
With a quiet wave, they let themselves out the gate and Daniel realised with a
shock that he and Valerie had been left alone.
He sat down on the bench again, suddenly unsure about what to do. He checked his watch then decided, with a surge of feeling, to talk to Valerie about marriage again. He loved her, of course. Marriage would mean they wouldn’t have to go through this again. But the moment the idea took shape, he knew it was a false one. Valerie didn’t want a child and marriage wouldn’t change that.

The fig tree above him stirred in the wind and a few fat raindrops fell into the dirt at his feet. He checked his watch; still another twenty five minutes before he should go into the house and find her. He pictured the darkened rooms, his own footsteps ringing in the empty hall. He thought of her alone and bloodied.

He scrambled to his feet and flung open the back door.

It’s human nature, he thought glumly, to see things for what they are only after the moment to act has passed. He moved slowly around the gallery, admiring Paul’s work. No doubt about it, the kid was the real thing.

He never learned to see Valerie clearly: when he was with her, he never seemed to know what was needed. His love rendered him stupefied.

After the abortion, she hardly slept or ate. She’d stayed in the studio at the back of her parents’ house day and night and worked until her hands were blistered. She was outrageously, fiercely happy, she told him when he visited. Her mind was working faster, better than before, she told him. It was as if she’d had something else removed, not a baby. Some kind of weight, an impediment.

After a week or so he pressed her on the engagement. She agreed — although she was adamant it was just for show.
‘You don’t own me,’ she had told him, slipping the ring onto her finger. ‘I care about you, darling, but we’re two souls, not one. I can’t look after you forever.’

Not long after that, Frank called Daniel and said, ‘Come over now. You’re taking her to the hospital.’ He was her fiancée; he had responsibilities.

When he arrived at the Dawson’s house, he could hear Valerie’s mother’s crying from the road. He found Valerie in the kitchen, her hand wrapped in a bloodied tea towel. She’d cut herself on broken china.

‘It’s ok, I’m happy to let it out,’ she said, wild eyed. ‘The pressure, the poison.’ She ran to Daniel and threw her smeared arms around his neck.

‘Thank goodness you came. Now we can get out of here,’ she said. Her eyes were hopeful and he felt a pang. Oh, to be so needed.

‘See? You were sent,’ she said. ‘Come on, let’s go.’

He held her until the ambulance arrived. The paramedics injected her with sedatives. She was led to the van, head bowed like a criminal. Daniel walked by her side, holding her good hand. As the medics took her elbows to help her into the ambulance, she turned to him.

‘Betrayer. Liar,’ she hissed. ‘I know you. Traitor!’ She turned to her parents on the pavement and screamed. ‘Crack him open, he’s black inside!’

He stood there, bewildered, on the pavement. She had seen something in him that he knew to be there himself. Some manifestation of evil. He wanted to fall to his knees.

The hospital kept her for more than a month. Wedding plans were never discussed after that. The day she was released she told him that from now on, her paintings were only about him. About a man with a central moral void. A man
who is so empty, he is hardly a man at all. It was the only thing that made her smile. But how, he wondered, did she know?

Two weeks after her release from hospital she went out dancing, fell down the stairs outside a nightclub in Kings Cross and bashed her skull on the iron railing. The worst of it for Daniel was the faint relief in the faces of her parents and siblings at the funeral. She hadn’t embarrassed them with a suicide after all.

Daniel made his way back to the reception and placed the folded letter from his accountant on Lena’s desk. He felt a kinship with Lena, for reasons he couldn’t explain. He hoped she would discover her own talent, in time.

He steadied himself on the desk for a moment and looked around the gallery at the pictures on the walls. A new guard, another generation. There was always a new wave to replace the last.

He opened the door and stepped outside into the sunshine on the top step of the gallery.

Today the forecast was for good weather. Bright winter light. A good day for painting.
Chapter 33

Lena tried hard not to think about Felix as she walked through Centennial Park. She crossed the road at the top of Oxford Street and passed a boutique where she turned to catch her reflection in the immaculate plate glass. Oh for heaven’s sake, she scolded herself.

During her childhood, her mother’s romantic urges were always followed by bad decisions. Love meant sleeping in the back of the car while her mother partied at a new boyfriend’s house; it meant moving in with strange friends of Cristina’s and being ignored. It meant fights and injuries.

But Lena’s own first love changed everything. Then love meant the sky falling in, she thought as she listened to her heels on the pavement, and your heart in pieces.

She met Sebastian at art school. It was her first day: he was hurrying towards her out of the shade of the teaching building, coming at her like a comet. Collision was inevitable.

When she pulled back and straightened up, she noticed his paint spattered pants and the way his hair swept his collar. He walked bow-legged, like a cartoon cowboy. He held a roll-up cigarette between his thumb and middle finger — pinched it like he was smoking a joint right down to the soggy roach. She was in love, belt and braces.

She remembered looking down at her stupid outfit. She felt such a fool in her Target jeans. The cheap sneakers from the seconds place over in Alexandria. They’d been just as good as the real thing, until that moment. She walked on past him with her head down but there was no mistaking the force of his smile.
Sebastian followed her around after that first day. He begged her to notice him. She was a force of nature, he said, like a water creature lost on dry land. She was a perfect object, if he couldn’t have her he would suffer. She blushed and told him to leave her alone but she only half meant it. It was embarrassing, all the attention. But it felt good, too.

‘You’ve got romance,’ Cristina diagnosed. Lena stopped eating except for bags of mixed lollies — milk bottles first, bananas last — and sat through her classes in a fainting daze.

‘Eat something, Lena. You’ll turn out anorexical, you dickhead,’ her mother said.

‘Anorexic, mama.’ Lena watched Sebastian and waited. Other girls came and went. Then she kissed him. It was summer.

She could still remember sunlight on her closed eyelids. When he kissed her back it was just as good as she’d hoped and she felt older, more sure of herself under his hands.

When Cristina heard his name (Sebastian, you must be joking!) she nearly choked on her salt and vinegar chips and said she knew they were doomed because a name like that is too much for any normal bloke. Why not just call him Romeo, or Casanova or Lothario, for pity’s sake?

‘Flipping heck Lena,’ she said. ‘He’s probably a closet.’

Lena packed up her discount shoes and her chain store pants and went out to Vinnies and got some itchy vintage dresses. She took up smoking and moved out of home and into Sebastian’s house in Campbell Street, Surry Hills. She was 17.
Other people noticed when things started to go wrong but Lena was devoted. He would finished his joint, blow the smoke into her hair and tell her she was beautiful. They took acid together, watched the tipping sunrise from the roof. Above the stink of bins they listened to the shuffle of the early-morning street sweeper. Sometimes she felt so full — so worshipped, so close to perfection — she believed she could die happy. Sometimes she wished for it. What was there to look forward to in life when you’ve already lived your finest moments?

Eventually, she felt him slipping from her grasp. When she went to him with quiet concerns he flew into a rage, accuse her of sneaking around behind his back. Then he sobbed and begged her to stay. Eventually pride stopped her from making demonstrations. When they lay on their futon on the floor and she watched him next to her, golden, arrogant and already planning his exit, Lena knew her heart was breaking.

She painted and surprised herself with angry pictures. Good pictures. At the end of her second year at college she was asked to create an entry for a national prize. That night, their neighbours on Campbell Street turned up their televisions and worried for the blonde girl next door.

Sebastian went to Tasmania to pick apples. Lena went home to Cristina with a sore head and a sorry heart. Cristina had scored a Department of Housing place in Waterloo by then, in one of the three story walk-ups that crouched in the lee of the tower blocks. Cristina and her neighbours smoked on their thin balconies and watched the concrete cancer eat away at the ledge above their heads. They thanked their lucky stars they weren’t living over there, in the suicide towers.
‘They reckon three jumpers a year, every year,’ Cristina told her, in an awestruck whisper. They were on the rickety balcony. Cristina had her feet up on the railing. She was painting her toenails pearly pink. Lena squinted up at top of the nearest tower with its flimsy guard rail.

Cristina put the lid on the nail varnish and took a loving draw on her fag. ‘It’s more like one a week on the train tracks. Who’d be a train driver, eh?’

Lena shifted on the nylon deck chair and arranged herself around the heavy sadness in her belly. It had become her new centre.

Cristina looked over at her. ‘You’ll feel better someday, y’know.’

‘I’m not a jumper, mama.’

‘I’m just saying.’

‘Well don’t. I wouldn’t.’ I couldn’t, thought Lena. Can’t get up out of this bloody chair. Can’t drag myself any further than the toilet and that’s only to sick up Cristina’s disgusting cooking.

Cristina seemed to read her mind. ‘And I know what you’re doing. The vomiting.’

‘Shuddup.’

‘There’s more than one way to kill yourself. You’re just going the lazy route. Slow death.’

‘I don’t want to die.’

Cristina had narrowed her eyes and stubbed out the butt end of her fag.

‘Well then. Live.’

Lena crossed Oxford Street into Paddington and stopped in the shade of a shop awning. Her high heels were rubbing against her toes.
Is that what I’m doing? she wondered. Living?
Chapter 34

Yasir’s thoughts fell into time with his stride. He’d always been a good walker. The steps fell like a metronome onto the concrete pavement. Lines of poetry raced through his head in tidy counterpoint.

He sighed. The problem with the poets was always the translations. Take Hafiz; his poems were loose and slippery things to start with. Too many translators got carried away. Many such ‘interpretations’ existed. One hesitated to call them translations.

Yasir crossed into the top of Centennial Park and lowered his head. It was all very well that his poets chattered on eloquently in his head — cups of wine, locks of hair, God at the bottom of a clay bowl, pledges of devotion and so on. But he still looked like a simple madman. Someone to be avoided.

Perhaps I truly belong to another time, he thought. A time when people crawled into caves and fasted until they saw bright lights and called them gods. In today’s world, folks cross the road to avoid people like me. To spend one’s life staring at the sea is an act of insanity.

The park was quiet. He noticed mothers pushing children in prams and shiftworkers dozing in their cars. He imagined he was walking through an innocent world, a quiet walled paradise.

There’s no sense in being afraid, he thought. There’s no time for that now. My brother is waiting. He left the park by the Oxford Street gate in the direction of Paddington.

When he rounded the corner of the leafy Paddington street, Yasir noticed the old man struggling down the steps in front of the elegant building. He was too far away to offer help but he could see that the man should not be attempting
this. Yasir watched the painful, straight-legged descent from more than a hundred yards away and felt a surge of panic. The strange momentum carried the man to the bottom step where he hovered for a moment. Then in a sudden and jerky movement, he launched himself down to the pavement.

Yasir stopped to watch. Something was quite wrong. The man shuffled to the kerb then stepped off the pavement and into the road between two parked cars.

Yasir saw a car coming around the corner. The old man saw it too and quickened his pace. Then he stepped into the path of the car. Yasir let out a cry as the old man turned to face the collision. The street erupted into a clamour of squealing brakes and shouts from onlookers.

The old man lay in the road behind the car. The driver, a middle aged woman, spilled out of the car and collapsed to her knees, screaming.

Yasir ran past the car to the man. When he skidded to his knees by the old man’s side he found himself in a lake of blood. It was draining — pouring out, as far as Yasir could see — from wounds on the old man’s body hidden beneath his clothes. The man’s mouth shaped itself around silent words.

Yasir’s hands were shaking. He placed them on the old man’s cheeks. He nodded and murmured. The man’s hand lifted and grasped Yasir’s. Yasir muttered a prayer in Farsi and stroked the dry skin of the old man’s face. He held the strong, gripping hand. Their eyes remained locked.

In that final second, he felt something pass between them: holding hands, eye to eye. Then the bright blue eyes flickered and the light inside them died. The eyelids closed halfway, as if mid-blink. Another second passed before the
hand clasped in Yasir’s became soft. It was as if death took the man piece by piece. The hand was last. When his grip grew slack, the man was utterly gone.

A collective intake of breath alerted Yasir to the crowd that had formed around them. He became aware that the driver was still screaming. Someone else was on the phone calling an ambulance. He wanted to tell them it was too late.

He got to his feet. The people around him seemed to take a half-step backwards. He pushed past them and stood alone on the pavement, looking down at his blood-soaked pants.

He was aware that he was crying. We are a multitude, he thought, of atoms and feelings. In collision.

He backed into the shadow of the building then turned and walked away.
Chapter 35

Jozef Fabin hunched into his jacket and looked around the dark Sydney street. It was before dawn on the 2nd of July, 1989. The streetlights seemed to lean into the wind like a row of stiff-necked black birds. That moment they switched off, signaling the end of night time. The cold bit at his ears and his chin. He realised that he was shivering.

Nothing to worry about, he told himself firmly. Just the body’s way of getting things moving. No-one ever broke a bone from it.

He stood in the street, trembling and disorientated, and peered at Joyce’s house. It began to drizzle and he swore under his breath, using all the words that he’d banned his son Daniel from using in the house, strung together in a quick torrent of invective. He’d booked the plane and left London in a mad rush; he hadn’t accounted for the fact that it would be winter in Sydney or that he’d be getting off the plane in the semi-darkness before dawn, when temperatures were at their meanest. Or that this final few metres to his friend’s house might be so difficult.

From a neighbouring street came the cough-cough of a cold car engine starting up. Time to get things moving. That’d be good, he told himself. But he didn’t move. The shivering had reached his knees and he thought: how ridiculous I am, like a schoolboy on the diving blocks.

Normally, he found it reassuring to think about the body’s natural defences. Clever old body. Sometimes it seemed to him as if all of life’s problems might be solved by reference to the human frame. All that marvellous adaptive design: each ligament solving a problem about strength and flexion;
each skin cell replying to the problem of bodily containment. To every question, an answer. If you were looking for a true bible, you could do worse than use the body as your text.

Jozef sneezed and another quick shudder went through him. His eyes were so tired that it hurt to stare but he continued to stare anyway, through half-closed lids, at the front door of the little terraced house in front of him. The footpath felt hard beneath his tired feet and knees. In a moment, he thought, I’ll walk down the path, knock on the door.

He was drifting: his thoughts were turning inward. In England it’d be afternoon, he mused. Daniel would be on his way home from school; a latch-key kid, that’s what the tabloid called children like Daniel who came home to an empty house and waited for the selfish parent to return from work. Daniel, for the record, seemed to love this solitude and freedom.

During term time, Jozef would be taking his second year anatomy class by now. By second year, he knew most of the kids and he knew the ones that needed bringing down a peg or two. Hell, someone had to do it. It made him furious that the students were so self-assured. Show some humility, he told them. All human effort is banal when measured against the ingenious ways a body stays alive. You won’t create anything so incredible in your lifetime.

*Are you a bible-basher, sir? A God-botherer?* There was always some smart-Alec at the back who liked to cause a bit of snickering. The way he carried on about bodily perfection, you could hardly blame them for thinking that he read a spiritual message in it. But he told them, truthfully: no, it isn’t about God. It’s about people — and, if one is to get philosophical, about the value of each and every human life. Because each life demonstrates the idea of perfection.
Of course there are times when a body can’t fix itself, he told them. There are things, to misquote Winston Churchill, up with which a body will not put. When Jozef reached this point in his lectures (they never laughed at the Churchill joke and he had lately learnt he was famous for it in the department) he felt the atmosphere tighten. Each time, he felt a corresponding disappointment.

Medical students only want gore; they don’t care about the poetry of it, he thought. They want scalpels and pus and stitching things up.

There are times when a body needs help, he would tell them. So what do we do? We cut people open. We take out organs. We irradiate cancers and kill immune systems along the way. We treat the heart and the kidneys fail from the drugs we use.

Afternoon in London. Daniel would be hungry. He often demolished half an Allison loaf in front of the TV before Jozef got home.

Jozef wiped the rain from his eyes. The porch light of the tiny house flickered on. The rain falling over the path to the door was transformed into a glittering forcefield. He blinked. The front door opened. A dumpy figure in a dressing gown peered out.

‘Jozef, is that you?’ It was Joyce, standing in the doorway of her house.

‘It’s me.’

‘Jesus. What are you doing, standing out here? I thought you were the fucking bailiff.’

He walked down the path, crossing the forcefield of light. Another shudder passed through him as the yellow of it fell upon his face.

She shook her head as she watched him. When he reached the doorway, she said, ‘I was waiting.’
‘I’m sorry.’

She stepped aside, her face screwed up. ‘Well, for pity’s sake, you’d better come in. You look a wreck.’

He followed Joyce along a narrow hallway, walking slowly as his eyes adjusted to the weak light of the house. Joyce led him into a small, warm kitchen and began to fill the kettle.

‘You’ll have to excuse the mess. And the way I look. Next time give us a bit more warning.’

He stood awkwardly in the doorway, body tense, the rain dripping into little circles on the floorboards beside his feet. He felt her gaze on him, moving up and down.

‘You’ve changed. In your face,’ she said.

The warmth of the house was working at him, loosening the muscles in his neck and soothing the stiffness from his knees. He needed to stay in control.

‘I just got off the plane.’

She gave him an odd look. It was an inadequate answer but the moment seemed crowded with things that needed to be said and he didn’t know how to start, how to get them out.

He moved to the centre of the room and sat down awkwardly at the wooden table. She was right to notice his face: the gaunt cheeks, the lines from worry lately added to his forehead. He had noticed it himself.

Joyce flopped into the chair opposite and took a leather tobacco pouch from her dressing gown pocket. The gas stove hissed behind her. Little by little, as he relaxed, the chair received the greater burden of his weight. He watched her
roll a cigarette. He noticed her hands looked older than the rest of her, stained by tobacco and ceramic dust.

‘So what makes a person decide to get on a plane and come halfway around the world?’ she asked.

‘I had to.’ He said it quickly, thoughtlessly. But it didn’t explain the urgency, the chaos of the urge that had propelled him. ‘I couldn’t wait.’

Unexpectedly, Joyce laughed. ‘Jozef Fabin did something spontaneous? Then you’ve changed more than I thought.’ She picked a stray piece of tobacco from between her front teeth. ‘You were never spontaneous.’

‘This is different. That stuff’ll kill you by the way.’

‘Haven’t changed completely, I see.’

No, you’re wrong; I’m quite different, he thought. I bought the airline ticket. I got on a plane. I left my son behind. In all, the most ridiculous series of things I’ve ever done. He reached into the pocket of his jacket and pulled out a photo of Daniel in a little plastic wallet. It was a lifeline, something real. He pushed it across the table to her.

She picked it up, peered at it. ‘Shit, look at that.’

‘Daniel. He’s twelve now.’ His heart was fit to burst in his chest.

‘He’s not in trouble is he?’

‘Oh no. Not him, he’s OK.’

‘He looks like Felicity. Even more than when he was small.’

‘Yeah. More every day.’ He felt a stab of guilt for each of them, for Daniel and Felicity. An old guilt and a new one.
Joyce shifted in her seat to scrutinise the picture under the kitchen light. The chink in the kitchen curtains showed a pale dawn staining the grey sky at last.

Jozef watched Joyce with the photograph. Daniel wasn’t smiling in that one. There was something else in that photo Jozef didn’t like. Would she see it too? The set of Daniel’s mouth; something shut-down and arid. A new distance.

Christ, he thought, a desperate churning starting up in his stomach, I need to bring my son back from that cold place he’s disappeared to.

Joyce frowned up at him. ‘Why don’t you take your jacket off?’

He stared back dumbly. The jet lag was beginning to take its toll: he couldn’t remember the last time he felt like this, the emotions sloshing around, the currents working their way to the surface. I hate it, he thought dimly. This silliness. This emotional incontinence.

Rain started up again and drummed against the window, the noise adding to the thrum in his head.

Joyce blew a puff of rich smoke across at him.

‘Come on Jozef,’ she said. ‘It’s not as if you’re just popping in on your way to the shops. You’ve come halfway around the bloody world. Take off your jacket and tell me what’s going on.’ She offered him a sardonic smile.

‘It’s possible I’ve made a big mistake.’ He kept the tremble from his voice with effort.

‘Well. You’re here now, aren’t you?’

He put his hands flat on the table. The fingertips were yellow-white against the scored wooden surface.
Slowly, Joyce lifted herself to her feet and walked around the table to stand behind his chair. He let her peel the wet jacket off his shoulders and his body responded, offering no resistance to the gesture that reached back through time, to more than a decade ago when such intimacies between them were expected.

She hung his jacket on a peg behind the door, every action deliberate and thoughtful. Respectful, he thought, watching her move over to the other side of the room. She took the noisy kettle off the stove and made tea in handmade teapot.

He watched the thin line of sky in between the kitchen curtains take on a new colour. Then she poured tea into two wonky mugs. She pushed one across to him.

‘Admire the china. Made it myself,’ she said.

‘Very nice. Unique.’

A thought occurred to him as he sipped his tea, preparing his story in his head. The thing about Joyce was that she was fair. You might have your own strange and stupid reasons for doing something but she wouldn’t judge; she wouldn’t be shocked. You just had your reasons; that was good enough for Joyce. It made the idea of telling her easier.

He watched her face as she supped a patient sip from her tea, took in the lines, the way gravity had made alterations to the shape. The grafts of time.

‘So?’

He coughed. His fingernails scrape-scraped at the blobs of candle wax on the tabletop.
‘Your man Daniel Faber. The gallery owner. You sent the cutting from the newspaper of the opening with his picture.’

He pulled out a press clipping from his jacket pocket and pushed it across to her. She’d sent it with her last letter, explaining that she’d had two pieces accepted into a high profile show at his gallery. Her face lit up with surprise as she took the clipping.

‘God yes. What about him?’

He took a short breath. ‘I know him.’

She looked up, frowning. ‘How is that possible?’

‘I knew him as a child. Danek, he called himself. Among other things.’

His mouth felt sour, remembering. He saw the confusion in her eyes.

‘In England?’

‘No, before.’

She frowned and tapped her fingers on her mug. ‘Really? I mean, that was a long time ago.’

In her response, he recognised the voice he used with his son when he was afraid of upsetting him.

‘Yes, forty years. And he hasn’t changed much. Hardly at all.’ He felt certain of it.

‘Jozef,’ she said softly, ‘it seems unlikely.’

‘No. I know him.’

He took a breath. The kitchen seemed to lose focus for a second. He’d come so far on such a flimsy premise — for an astonishing moment he could hardly believe it himself. Her disbelief was ringing in his ears. He knew the mind
was a treacherous thing and that people were capable of inventions that felt like truth and of fantasy that felt like memory.

But not this time, he thought.

He looked down at the table. He knew the face in that press clipping, plain as day. Forty years older but quite clearly the same person. It was the boy in the barn — and to say it like that, it sounded like something from a fairytale. He had names for that boy, names he had used over and over in his nightmares and when black thoughts visited him during the day. Plenty of names but not, he thought, Danek or Daniel.

Forty years. He would like to know his real name.

He slept in Joyce’s bed, dropping quickly into a vague dream of his foster brother Peter. When he woke, an hour or two later, he lay there stunned, silenced by the tide of thoughts in his head. The sheets were soft from use and the pillowslip smelt mousey. The bedroom, tucked in behind a tiny sitting room, had the same miniature proportions as the rest of the house. Its boards were bare and rough and it was furnished sparsely but it seemed cluttered nevertheless, by the books left open on the rug and Joyce’s clothes discarded on the chair. To steady himself, he recounted the sequence of his arrival — the train, the plane, the taxi ride from the airport — so that the journey retained its realistic proportions. I could go home tomorrow, he told himself. He muttered softly to the walls, to the chunks of crumbling plaster on the skirting boards; to the flapping piece of batik strung across the curtain rail.
Joyce was banging around in the kitchen, swearing at cockroaches. He guessed it was nearly lunchtime in Sydney — a thought that caused him to immediately think of Daniel, who must be asleep under a strange roof, in a strange bed in the northern hemisphere’s predawn hours. They used to watch him as he slept, he and Felicity, the way all parents do, when look of peace on his face was enough to make them forget the mess they were in.

He rubbed at his eyes, which were gritty from sleep. The batik sarong flicked and flapped. He sat up and reached for the hold-all on the floor next to the bed.

Joyce appeared at the door and watched him silently, then padded across the old bare boards in her socks and stood looking down at him. She was wearing a woollen jumper the colour of moss. He reached out to catch the thread that dangling from the ribbing at the bottom.

‘Here, I’ll tie it. Stay still.’

She rolled her eyes at him. ‘Forget it, this old thing’s had it.’

‘I’ll buy you another. I’ve got pounds. Isn’t that like having gold ingots around here?’

‘Big man, you are. Flashing your pounds around.’

She dyes her hair, he thought. A line of grey, just visible at the roots. He reached into his bag and pulled out a cardboard folder.

He smoothed a dog-eared corner then held it out to her. ‘Here.’

‘What is it?’

‘There was an oral history project about kids in the Second World War at my university. You know some of it already. But not all of it.’
He saw it clearly in memory: the night he had told them part of the story, Joyce and Felicity, many years ago. After the rum had run out and they were huddled together, the three of them, under the blanket issued to him by the college. They’d had to whisper in the dark so he wouldn’t be caught with students in his room. When he got to the horrible part of the story he’d had to say it twice — *my brother was shot, shot in front of me* — before they understood.

Joyce took the folder and pulled out the sheaf of papers inside. ‘They made you talk about it? What happened?’

He let his hands fall in his lap. The flap-flap of the sarong at the window filled the silence. He cleared his throat.

‘They didn’t make me. I offered. I told them what I remembered.’

She held the folder away from her body, like a contaminated thing.

He smiled. ‘You don’t have to read it.’

‘Damn right I don’t.’ Joyce coughed wetly into her sleeve. ‘But I will, of course.’

He watched her go back through the door into the kitchen. Heard her fill the kettle and light the gas stove.

Then: the scrape of the chair on the kitchen floor. The sound of her sitting herself, heavily, at the table. He felt his temperature rise, the beads of sweat breaking out above his stubbly upper lip, as he imagined her turning the pages. He lay back on the bed, his heart beating a tattoo.

The interviewer, Susan, had settled into her seat by the window and turned on the small recorder on the table between them.
'What is your name?'

He smiled at her. Sudden silliness descended on him: he felt tempted to invent another name, to make her laugh. Postgraduate students always took themselves so seriously, he thought, as if gravitas were expected. He took a breath and continued.

‘My name is Jozef Fabin; with a ‘z’. That’s the Polish way. I am forty seven years old. As I understand it, I was born in or near the town of Lvov in 1938.’

‘When did you go to Germany?’

‘Around 1940. My parents and my brother went to work in the German fields. You know, “eastern workers”. I was an infant. I went with my mother. Probably stuffed into some shawl. The guards spared my life. If they even knew I existed.’

‘What happened to your parents?’

‘I don’t know. They died. I don’t remember much before my brother died.’

‘What happened then?’

‘In the winter of 1944 to 45, after my parents died, my brother Danek and I escaped the labour farm and went begging from farm to farm. Some people were kind to us. At the end we stayed in a barn. It may have been near Köln.’

He took a long breath. He didn’t like to think of the barn, the long-ago smell of hay, rank and sweet, the scratch of the cut straw against his back as he slept. The layer of dust that lifted into the air as they moved around.

‘Yes?’
'The sky was full of planes. We could hear the Allied troops on the other side of the river. Every day, there were new bombs, new fires.'

‘The Rhine, you mean?'

‘I suppose. I was small, I didn’t know.’

‘And what happened in the barn?’

‘A gang of boys found us. They were boy soldiers running away from fighting on the battlements on the German side.’

Susan nodded.

He carried on. ‘They were very frightened and angry.’

‘Were they armed?’

‘Yes, they had bits and pieces of uniform too. Little boys in big trousers. Of course, you wore whatever you could get your hands on.’

‘They found your hiding place?’

‘Yes. They shot my brother. Bang, like that. In the head.’ It was as he remembered it; like a film sped up to this point. As if his life started then.

Susan composed her face. ‘Then what happened?’

‘I heard them leave so I came out — I jumped — out of my hiding place in the rafters of the barn. But I should have waited. I came face to face with one of the boys. He shouted at me in German. Then he knew a little Polish so he shouted at me in Polish. I thought he was going to kill me. But he told me to show him where my brother kept his papers.’

‘What papers?’

‘His identity papers. They were inside Danek’s jacket, stitched in by our mother I expect. I don’t remember.’ It was like a refrain; I don’t remember. Really, I don’t remember.
‘And then?’

He looked up at Susan and the sunlight through the window behind her obliterated her face for a second.

‘Then he told me I had a new brother now. He would become Danek Fabin. He had killed people, he said. He needed to become someone else. A Pole would suit him fine. He would kill me too if I gave him away.’

He heard Susan draw in a breath. The details unravelled in his head: his hands tied with the bigger boy’s belt; the blows across his head until his ear bled. He was made to tell him their mother’s name and then made to call her a whore, hure, hure. He was so young; the word was a dead leaf on his tongue, meaningless and dry.

Jozef scratched his chin. The details began to fade. It was hard to bring them back after a lifetime of trying to forget.

‘What did you do?’ Susan leaned in.

‘I ran away as soon as I could. That’s when the Americans found me.’

‘You escaped him.’

He shrugged and composed his answer carefully. ‘Well. I saw him again as a matter of fact. And that’s how I know he got away with it.’

‘When did you see him?’

‘At the docks in Calais, where some refugees were being put onto passenger ships.’

‘Terrible luck.’

‘There was some good luck and some terrible luck. As you say.’

‘You were going to England?’
‘Yes. The Red Cross arranged a transport for me. They had found a family to adopt me in England.’

‘A long way from home.’

‘What home?’ He laughed, without a trace of bitterness. ‘Poland? The labour farm? The barn?’

‘I see. Tell me about the boy.’

‘He was in the group of Polish refugees awaiting transport. I expect he made it through.’

‘Did he see you?’

Jozef looked at the window. ‘He saw me. We didn’t speak. I didn’t tell anyone.’

We saw each other, he thought. I felt the heat of his stare on my back. The boy who called himself my brother, Danek Fabin.

‘You didn’t tell anyone?’

‘No. Secrets were a matter of survival, like stealing. I didn’t know how to tell the truth.’

The light crossed behind Susan’s head and he was in the barn again.

‘Anyway, he knew my mother’s name and my father’s name and all the other Polish words I taught him besides.’

‘The other words?’

‘Yes. Didn’t I say? He had me tied up there for three whole days.’

Jozef sat up in bed. He was a clever boy, the boy who became Danek, his brother’s usurper. He learned quickly and his Polish accent was plausible. He
had the quick intelligence of a rough survivor. He lived, Jozef thought. I know he did.

He swung his legs onto the bare boards of the floor. Beneath the boards, beneath the floor, through the fiery core—there, at the other side of the world, was his son, probably wondering what the hell his father was doing.

Jozef heaved himself to his feet. He could still hear the rain outside, sensed the world beyond the window was completely alive, in the thrust of its day. He walked softly into the kitchen. It seemed smaller than before, the air clogged with Joyce’s smoke. He pulled out a chair and sat next to her. After a moment she took his hand, and they sat in silence for a moment longer.

‘You’ve come because of a newspaper article?’

‘I recognised him.’

She sighed and pushed the papers to one side. It doesn’t matter that she doesn’t believe me, he told himself. I know.

He reached over and lifted the photo of his son from the table. He traced the boy’s face with his thumbs. Daniel in that terrible school uniform, dressed up like a soldier. The scenes they’d had over that bloody uniform. His adoptive brothers talked him down in the end, told him he didn’t have the right to stop Daniel getting the education he deserved. The boy won the place in that school fair and square, didn’t he?

‘Call him.’ Joyce’s voice broke his reverie.

‘Not yet. There’s nothing to tell.’

‘Chrissake, he’s your son. Tell him you’re here. Tell him what you ate on the plane. Tell him you love him. Or do people only say that in films these days?’
No, he thought. I’m only here for my son, to show him I’m not made of stone. His throat hurt from not saying it. But how could she understand their difficulties? It wasn’t something he put into his letters.

Joyce stood and rinsed her mug under the tap, chuckling.

‘What do I know? The last time I went to see a film was in the seventies.’
Watching her laugh, he remembered her body moving like that, the effort of the laughter shaking her torso, making her big breasts jiggles under her jumper.

He smiled back at her, his eyes watery at the relief of it.

‘It’s good to see you.’

‘Yes. It is. Shut up.’

She crossed the room swiftly, flicking her tea towel, leant over him and planted a wet kiss on the mouth. The shock pinned him to his chair for a moment. She grinned back at him, eyebrows in a mocking arc.

‘Don’t worry, I don’t mean anything by it.’

She stood back from him, hands on her powerful hips. A dog-earred cigarette still dangled between her fingers and a thin plume of smoke rose along the side of her body.

He reached for the cigarette and took a cautious pull, the tang of the smoke like a catapult through time, to events that were drained of colour in his memory. To his room in the college when he was a young lecturer and Felicity and Joyce were his students and scandal waited for them, unjustly, around every corner.

He handed the cigarette back. ‘Can you take me somewhere tourists go?’

‘What about down to the harbour?’

‘OK.’
‘Let’s go now.’

Now, now. It was always like this with Joyce. There was a momentum to every minute. It made you forget other plans, other responsibilities.

She tugged his hand, pulled him to his feet.

‘The Manly ferry’s good,’ she said. ‘We could have fish and chips on the other side.’

Joyce smiled at him, a great big melon of a smile, and for a moment he thought everything might turn out all right.
Chapter 36

Jozef followed Joyce to the back of the ferry and sat down next to her on the painted bench. The winter sun caught the sequins on her Indian cotton top and he felt a brief flutter of happiness. Above him, the clouds had broken up, revealing a blue sky behind. As the chugging ferry left Circular Quay, he closed his eyes and enjoyed the wind ruffling the hair on the back of his head. Joyce nudged him with her elbow.

‘Wake up, dozy.’

‘I’m not asleep, I’m thinking.’

He glanced sideways at her wild hair — in the old days it was lighter, the colour of hay. His body seemed to remember Joyce’s: the hairs on his arms stood up when hers brushed his as they sat side by side on the bench. It wasn’t lust exactly; rather the memory of it. Being with her stirred in him a younger man, a man who had taken risks. He saw how the years had changed him, had robbed him of personal generosity. Joyce was generous by instinct, emphatically so.

He closed his eyes. Fifty years old and dead from the neck down, he scolded silently. He felt his arm drawing warmth from hers.

The harbour opened up around him, beautiful as a picture. He was mad not to have come sooner. The excuses he’d made for so many years seemed empty now. Joyce must have been so disappointed with him — it was kind of her to have spared him her chagrin.

When they drew closer to the north shore he saw the mansions tumbling down to private jetties, the monuments to the wealth of the place, to its self-confidence. He saw how on summer days it must seem like a glittering paradise
here. One could feel like a king. The place took on a magical aspect for him, seen through the haze of his jetlag.

They got off the boat at Manly wharf and walked around to the gravel path above the beach. The sight of Joyce striding ahead brought other memories back: of saying goodbye and of watching her walk away.

The sea was a faceted grey, the colour of anodized zinc. Joyce stopped and leaned against the old iron railing, her fingernail scraping at a rusted join and they idled and watched the surfers doing battle with the waves below. Jozef peered at them, awed. He’d never seen waves as big as these and yet there were people out among them, small specks in black and neon, their feet white and vulnerable, trailing behind boards.

He glanced at her face, which seemed closed to him. She turned at last and tugged a piece of hair back behind her ear.

‘So what are you going to do about Daniel Faber?’

‘Ah,’ he smiled. He wanted to lighten the conversation for her sake. ‘The master plan.’

‘Have you got one?’ She gave him a smile that lifted her face momentarily out of its mask of concern.

He sensed they were in her domain now: the domain of chaos, of unplanned events, of life without method. ‘No plan, not really.’

She let out a gusty sigh. ‘Shit. I’m sorry for you Jozef. Your brother was shot in front of you.’

‘They were just kids.’

Jozef squinted at her and saw the flicker of surprise cross her face. ‘You see, everyone was scared,’ he said.
He put a hand on her arm. The wind sent her hair flying around her face again.

‘Would you have killed someone?’ she asked.

‘God, what a question. I don’t know. I was very young.’

‘Lucky for you, probably.’

There it goes again, he thought, the luck business. As if the stuff was dancing around him. He stared down at the surfers in the treacherous sea.

‘My brother might have killed a boy if he thought we would stay alive.’

He wasn’t superstitious or naïve. We’re all capable, he thought. We’re none of us saints. ‘That’s what it was like.’

He saw, for a moment, the dim memory of the older boys in their borrowed clothes, charging into the barn with the energy of children playing a war game. High on danger, the power of the uniform an intoxicating thing. Starving wretches, the same as he.

A shadow moved across Joyce’s face as she tried to take in this new equivocation. ‘I thought you were more … you know, black and white than that.’

‘Good people in a good world.’

‘Why are you here then? If you don’t blame him for what he did.’

‘To find out if I’m right. To get a look at him.’

He looked away. The truth was much darker and he felt bound to hold the violence of it inside. I’m here because we’re connected, he thought. I must see the man who did those terrible things. I’m your brother now, he’d said. Danek Fabin, your brother. I must judge for myself whether evil exists or we are simply creatures who respond and adapt and do what we must. It seemed a terrible
thought — he did not expect Joyce to understand. How could you tell someone you planned to face the devil himself?

He suppressed a shudder. Joyce didn’t need to see that. ‘I’ll just go to see him. That’s all.’

He hoped that to describe it as a small and trivial thing would make it so. His throat clenched at the thought of facing the other man: so he turned his face away from Joyce’s so she wouldn’t see the fear written there.

‘And what then?’

He shrugged. In truth, he didn’t know.

She turned back to the sea and he moved closer to her, tucked his head into the crook of her neck. They fell into silence together. As the minutes passed, he felt more hopeful that she might grow more accepting of the idea of his quest. He felt hopeful, too, that she might still have some sense of faith in him. He sensed she humoured him. Perhaps she had good reason: perhaps she recognised his limitations better than he saw them himself.

The waves coursed rhythmically onto the sand below them. The momentum brought me here, he thought drowsily. Something you should understand, Joyce. The natural unfolding of events, the inexorable way things occur and connect according to their own schedule.

Later, Joyce told him she had planned a trip to her friend’s house down by the Shoalhaven River and would not — she meant this in no uncertain terms — change her plans for him, when he hadn’t had the brains in his head to phone her and let her know he was coming.

Colour crept into Jozef’s cheeks. She was moody; he’d forgotten.
He stood on the other side of the table from her, thankful for the obstacle separating them. Of course he wouldn’t expect her to change her plans, heavens no. Hot shame rose up in him. He should have planned things properly. He should have told her; should have told Daniel the truth, he probably would have understood — the boy was almost a teenager. Should, should, should. He had approached this whole thing in the wrong way. If it was a mess now and a failure, he had no-one to blame but himself.

She looked a little embarrassed at his apology and thrust her hands into the pocket of her jacket. ‘Sorry. I didn’t mean to come across as the school marm.’

He looked up from under half-lowered lids. ‘I should have waited and planned things a little better.’

She pointed to her little suitcase, packed and ready, tucked behind the hallstand. ‘You can come if you like, or stay here. You’ll have the place to yourself.’

The pert suitcase was a sign of the sealed nature of events.

She must be in love, he thought, with dawning surprise. There was no other explanation for such uncharacteristic forethought. He saw the strain of it in her face. She was desperate to go.

‘I’ll stay here.’

He said it without hesitation. The idea of staying at Mac’s house in the middle of nowhere filled him with anxiety.

‘Mac’s letting me visit. That means he’ll have put the time aside. Plus, I want to go,’ she said. ‘You might like it down there. It’s beautiful. And you can shake off the jet lag. It’d be nice for you to meet Mac.’
He heard the unspoken message clearly: Mac was, indeed, her lover.

‘He’s a painter,’ she said tartly, as if it explained the enormous pressure on his time.

He felt an old irritation surface. Joyce had always had unrealistic hopes when it came to bringing her friends together. Keeping things separated: that was how you avoided embarrassments.

‘No thanks,’ he said. ‘There are things I need to do.’

‘What things?’ Joyce asked, laughing.

She was right. What would he do? Go charging around to this man Daniel Faber’s gallery and demand — what, exactly? His self-confidence deflated. He wasn’t ready. He had no idea how to approach the very thing he had come to do.

‘I need to prepare myself,’ he said sheepishly, aware that he was beginning to sound foolish.

He put his hands on the back of the kitchen chair but he immediately felt it made him look less sure of himself so he took them away. They hung by his sides and brushed against his thigh. His pocket bulged with strange, bright Australian notes from the Bureau de Change at the quay. He felt self-conscious with all that money and nothing to think of to spend it on.

‘Don’t be ridiculous,’ she said. ‘You’re not sleuthing, Jozef. You just want to take a look at the man you’re so fixated on. So let’s go. I can drive you to the gallery now. Get the damn thing over with.’

‘All right.’ He blurted it out, so loud it was almost a shout, before he had the chance to change his mind. ‘Let’s go then.’ He felt as if he might be shrinking.
She was around the table already, her arm around his shoulder. ‘Hey, I didn’t mean it. I’m sorry. I was trying to wind you up. Calling your bluff.’

‘You don’t even believe that it’s possible I recognise him. I shouldn’t listen to you.’

‘I’m your friend. I think you should do what you came to do.’

‘Thank you.’

Joyce squeezed him to her side. ‘Do it at your own speed. But for pity’s sake call your son. It’s not his fault you built up a head of steam and charged off.’

She looked at him sternly and he saw that none of the things he was worried about — the oddness of his story, the fierceness of his belief and the fact that he had acted like a witless, flighty fool— mattered to her. But she would not accept him being foolish about his son. His heart flooded with gratitude.

‘I’ll call him right away,’ he said.

He kept the emotion out of his voice and she said nothing in reply, only pointed him to the telephone, which was on the hallstand.

He held the phone in his hand and leaned against the wall. He tried to conjure up the image of his child in his head: the boyish face whose cells held the secrets of the mannish shape to come, his long body at the end of its childhood. Daniel was on the dizzying edge of a great hormonal cataclysm. His face seemed to stretch itself in new directions daily to accommodate the new squareness of the jaw, the broadness of the brow. And Jozef saw Felicity’s eyes, no mistaking them, staring back at him, out of his son’s solemn face.
The number in London rang and rang until eventually a sleepy voice answered. Jozef swore under his breath. He’d forgotten about the time difference.

‘Padma, I’m sorry. It’s Jozef.’

She groaned. He heard a deep voice rumble sleepily beside her. ‘I’ll get Daniel.’

He heard Salil’s mother place the phone down. Moments later there was a scuffling noise then Daniel came on the phone.

‘Dad?’

The boy sounded much younger on the phone. A pang sliced through Jozef, keen as a blade. He pictured Daniel by the Raos’ bed, the lamplight on his face.

‘Dad?’

‘It’s me, Daniel. I’m in Sydney, Australia. Are you OK?’ Silence at the end of the line. ‘Daniel?’

‘I’m not Daniel any more, I’m Felix.’

‘Oh. Wh —’

‘And when you come back, I’m not going to live with you anymore.’

Jozef felt the panic rise in his chest. He should have brought his boy with him, simple as that.

‘Listen, I’m sorry. You could come here. I should have thought of it before. Would you come?’

‘What?’

‘Come to Sydney, Daniel. I can meet you at the airport.’

‘No. That’s a stupid idea.’
‘Go on.’ Why was the boy being so stubborn?

‘Dad, I’m tired.’

‘Please, Daniel’

‘It’s Felix.’

The line went dead. Jozef stared at the phone until it seemed unrecognisable — an unreal object, an odd and meaningless thing in his hand.

As they rode down the hill on the bus Joyce told him he could do them both a favour by letting up on himself about his son and getting on with it. There was time enough to fix things with Daniel.

Felix, Jozef corrected. He’s calling himself Felix. Whatever next?

Meanwhile, she said, he ought to think about how he planned to walk into a stranger’s life after a zillion years. And then what? Talk to him? Accuse him? You’ve cut the loaf now, she said. Go ahead and make the sandwich. But for heaven’s sake, work the damn thing out first.

They were going to take the train to Nowra. He repeated the word but the odd name meant nothing to him, the collection of sounds rolled in his mouth as strange as foreign pennies. He kept close to Joyce, carrying his small bag next to his chest and felt diminished, childish. He didn’t know where he was going; he was simply being led.

Joyce guided him through the big old concourse at Central to the country trains and sat him down on the train by the window with the bags. He gave her one of the garish notes from the wad in his pocket and she came back five minutes later with two little bottles of brown apple juice and an egg sandwich each.
He fell asleep soon after the train started moving and when he woke and looked out the window, he saw that the city was behind them. The train was a long curve snaking along the top of a ridge in densely wooded bushland, cutting the wilderness like a mythic mechanical God, the sunlight glinting off its wheels.

‘The Royal National Park,’ shouted Joyce, over the clatter of the train.

He pushed the sliding window down and leaned his head out to see the front and the end of the train forming its long arc along the track. The trees were eucalypts, Joyce shouted up to him. They pulled into Stanwell Tops station and while they waited he craned to see their graceful branches above the carriage. Up close, he saw their leaves were feathery. Light shone through the uppermost branches onto the silver limbs, giving the impression of openness and light. But when they were seen from a distance, in the folds of bush that rolled into steeper gullies below, the impression was of a solid thing, where no light or air might penetrate. His breath caught, the idea of it making him immediately claustrophobic.

He settled back against the vinyl of his seat. Before long the ocean, wide and blue, appeared on the left side of the train and a high, forested escarpment towered on the other. In this narrow wedge of landscape, he imagined how one’s life might feel, compressed by the impressive ridgeline and the shore.

Wind-whipped promontories buttressed the escarpment. The rock faces seemed whittled, as if the land had thrust forward long ago, then had peeled and torn. He felt curiously moved by the character of the landscape and somehow exposed by it. He saw that this was a place that might tear at you, that might draw the rawest emotions to the surface. The trees exercised a special power over
him. He saw the variation in the shapes; but also the sameness, the fine lines and repetition.

Above him the clouds were almost gone and the winter sun shone down — brighter than any northern sun. The conversation with his son slipped back into his mind and he wished, God, like an arrow in his chest, that the boy was by his side.

Mac met them in the station carpark in a clapped-out Honda. He shook hands with Jozef but looked quizzically at Joyce.

‘D’you always take an understudy on your dirty weekends?’ he said.

Jozef was a little shocked.

‘It’s an emergency,’ she said lightly to Mac, before kissing him on the mouth.

As they pulled apart, Jozef felt Mac giving him the once-over. Perhaps it was a mistake to come. It wasn’t too late to look for a motel in town and he could catch the train back to Sydney in the morning. No harm done.

‘Come on, Mac. Please? Jozef can sleep on the verandah. He’s only staying for a night or two.’

‘A night,’ Jozef said, his voice unnaturally high.

‘We’ll put you in the studio. There’s a party tonight anyhow.’ Mac said.

He smiled and caught Jozef off-guard. Jozef had been bracing for more awkwardness. He returned the smile.

They piled in, Jozef in the back next to two large ten-litre tins of paint held in place by a seatbelt. Keep an eye on those, Mac said.
They swerved out of the carpark and in five minutes they left the main road and turned onto an dusty dirt road, the small car bouncing over the ruts. Jozef held onto the paint cans with both hands, his back already sore from the jolting suspension.

They were driving into the bush now. He leaned forward in his seat, watching as they moved through patches of shade and light. He saw how the trees further back were shedding bark like sheets of peeling paint; how the grey of their trunks resolved, as he drew closer, into mauves and pinks. Mac pointed out a stand of cedars, their bodies salmon-white. By the side of the road, the dirt was orange.

They began to travel downhill. He felt far from home, suddenly — as if they were flying, careening madly, further than he’d ever been, far from the world he knew. He was light headed and exhilarated but a longing inside him, from somewhere in the region of his solar plexus, felt as if it was tugging him backwards in the direction of his son and home.

They turned a corner. The river opened up suddenly before them like a wonderful and hidden inland sea: it was broad, navy and brown, reflecting the whipped clouds and the bright sky. The water was flanked by fields of the brightest green. The place is a bowl for the sun, he thought, dazzled.

Mac knocked the gear stick into second and slowed then turned in his seat, a grin splitting his face.

‘Welcome to Valhalla.’

Jozef woke with the sun in his eyes, the light streaming through the dusty pane of the studio window onto the narrow divan. His mouth was dry and he supposed he
had been snoring, mouth open. Saliva had pooled on the pillow and his tongue caught against the parched roof of his mouth. He groaned and rolled, trapped the blanket beneath his shoulder, then rolled again — attempting to free himself from the tangle of the covers — and landed on the wooden floor, his forehead knocking against the wooden boards. He flung the covers away, lay his head back against the boards and stared up at the cobwebby beams beneath the tin roof. Valhalla, he thought grimly, rubbing his stubbly chin. Hall of the righteous dead. For heaven’s bloody sake.

He sat up, fiercely annoyed. He was an idiot to have let himself be talked into coming here. Joyce had let him down by insisting that he come. As it was, he’d woken up in the dead of night, woken up completely, pinged straight into consciousness at the very instant of emerging from sleep. The dark of the studio had been so complete, he’d been trapped in his bed for more than an hour. Then the need to pee had got the better of him so he walked like a blind man, his toes gripping the cold boards, arms in front of his face until he found the door. When he opened it, the gust of cold air set his teeth on edge but the moon, a sliver against black, shed just enough light for him to hazard a few steps across the freezing grass. Then, as he was peeing, delirious with the release, the pain in his gut finally softening, something came hurtling down the slope of bush behind the hut towards him and he nearly jumped out of his skin. His feet hardly touched the dirt as he flung himself back in the direction of the studio. From the safety of the doorway, he managed to make out the hulking shape of an animal — could it be a wombat? It was pig-like, inquisitive. It sniffed at him stupidly. He slammed the door of the cabin shut and hoped the sound would carry across the slope to the old stone house.
The evening had started well enough. Mac had cooked a passable lamb roast, with potatoes he’d dug out of the ground and washed under the outside tap. Joyce, whistling and exhilarated, created a salad from the sweet inside leaves of a wilted red cabbage and handfuls of the dill that had gone to seed along the side of the house. But as the night had closed in, Jozef’s anxiety began to grow. He felt trapped; he saw he was being delayed from the task he’d set himself. He caught, once or twice, a look from Joyce that made him wonder if she wasn’t testing him a little. Seeing how he’d cope.

Relax, she said, shaking his arm. Relax!

As Mac and Joyce made their way through the second bottle of wine and then dragged out Mac’s collection of old records, he sank further into gloom. His failures seemed to pile up around him — as a father, as a man — until he said a quiet good night, slunk back to the divan in the freezing studio, the rich meal heavy in his stomach.

He stood up and pulled the old plank door open, shading his eyes from the bright morning. He saw immediately that the sun was high in the sky; it must be close to midday, he realised in a flood of panic. He’d slept through the morning entirely. He scanned the clutter behind him on the worktable for a clock and found an oversized digital watch, the plastic strap broken and the surface dotted with tiny paint specks. It was 11.47.

He noticed an easel in a dark corner of the room, which held a small canvas. The image depicted a naked woman, painted realistically — with photographic detail, in fact — holding her breasts in her hands, legs astride. There, pinned on the wall behind the easel he saw a torn out page from an adult magazine; the same girl, the same pose. Jozef couldn’t help smirking. This is
what Mac painted here at the temple of the bloody Gods. He pulled the studio
doors behind him and stepped out into the sun.

The idea of catching Mac and Joyce in the swinging hammock made him
skirt the house and walk, instead, to the front yard, where he stopped to watch
two small brown birds hopping in and out of a hole in a sandy patch of soil. He
craned his head to see around the side of the house and saw that Mac’s car was
gone. A second pang of alarm went through him. He crossed the path to the front
doors of the house and stuck his head in, calling out Joyce’s name.

His voice echoed in the cool hallway of the house. He was completely
alone. There was no-one here to guide him to the station; no car to take him
either. He walked, fuming, into the shadowy kitchen and helped himself to a
banana and an apple from the fruit bowl. Then, turning his back on the previous
night’s mess, he stepped back outside. He turned in what he thought was the
direction of the river and started to walk.

He aimed for the line of trees that flanked the river on both sides. He
crossed a paddock dotted with mounds and large holes, passed a big white
cockatoo that picked his way in a comic march along the fence wire beside the
track, unperturbed by his human counterpart. Before long, Jozef joined a track
that led, he saw, from the old house by a smarter route than the one he’d taken.
The river was soon visible between the trees and he could see the orange
sandstone of the boulders at shore level on the other side. He stripped to his t-
shirt and enjoyed the warm sun on his arms.

He reached the river, kicked off his shoes and sat down on the sandy
bank. Ants crawled over his feet and close by he saw the tracks of some kind of
belly-dragging animal heading up the sand into the brush. The water was still as
a lake for fifteen feet of shallows, he saw, growing faster towards the middle third. At the deepest part, the dark stripe in the centre of the river, he saw there was a fast running current. He sat for some moments, weighing up if it was safe to swim then took off his jeans and shirt and waded into the shallows in his underwear. It was a good temperature, not too cold. He lay in the shallows sifting the fine sand through his fingers, staring up at the canopy of trees. Then he lay quite still, his gaze narrowing to a spot in the sky that was flecked, every now and then, by high flying black birds that swooped and darted. A long minute passed.

‘Shit. He’s drowned!’ Mac’s voice rang across the river gully.

Jozef sat up. Mac was splashing towards him. When he saw Jozef sit upright, Mac let out another shout. He stopped, knee deep then turned and strode back to the bank, his wet jeans clinging to his legs.

Jozef stood up, feeling idiotic in his underpants, his greying chest hair beaded with river water.

‘Hey! Wait.’

Joyce handed him an onion from a rack above the kitchen sink.

‘Sorry Sleeping Beauty, you missed your ride.’

‘You should have woken me,’ Jozef grumbled.

She tugged the rubber gloves off her hands and threw them down onto the draining board, then handed him a wooden chopping board and a knife.

‘Can’t take you now, anyhow. We’ve got twenty people coming before sunset.’

‘What?’
He put the breadboard on the table and took the knife gingerly. Its blade was honed to a keen edge.

Mac walked into the kitchen, pulling a pale blue sweater over his head.

‘Sally sold a painting. A big one.’

He pushed his arms into the arms holes of his sweater then rubbed his fingertips together, signalling to Jozef: *big painting, big money.*

‘Sally’s a friend who lives up the river. We’re giving her a party. It’s the custom. You know, a celebration? Don’t sulk.’

Joyce tuned her back to him and walked out into the lounge room. Mac grinned at him, then nodded to the onion and winked. He followed Joyce out the door.

Jozef watched them go. He rolled the onion in his palm then placed it on the board. He wasn’t sulking, he had things to get on with. He let the knife fall; the onion fell into two easy halves.

Joyce’s voice rang from the bedroom.

‘Diced, not rings. It’s for paella. Ok?’

No, he wanted to say, it is not ok. This was a stupid idea and now I’m stuck chopping vegetables. But he diced the onion anyway, wiping tears from his cheeks that may as well have been genuine.

When he’d washed the board and the knife and put them both away, Mac appeared at the front door with a basket of wood.

‘Come make the bonfire?’

Jozef wiped his hands on a tea towel. ‘Sure.’

That was one thing he knew how to do well — build a good fire.
He followed Mac to the front yard where he saw that a big circle had been scorched into the grass and the leaves and grass raked back. In the centre lay a pile of old logs, dry and crumbling. A second pile of dead branches and chopped pieces was piled under a tree.

He joined Mac stacking the bonfire. They carried a big log to the centre of the pile together.

‘You’re interested in Daniel Faber?’
Jozef nodded, surprised. ‘Did she tell you why?’

‘Nope. Some personal thing, she said.’
Jozef brushed sweat out of his eyes, relieved. ‘Something like that.’

‘Well he’s on his own, that man.’ Mac shook his head, pausing for breath with his hands on his hips. ‘Never known one like him for bullshitting.’

‘You know him?’
Mac shrugged. ‘We all do. He’s a customer. It’s a pretty small scene.’

A customer; Jozef hadn’t expected that from Mac. Not when he was such an artist. He frowned. ‘So, what do you mean about him bullshitting?’

Jozef’s heart skipped in his chest. He studied Mac’s face.

Mac shrugged. ‘He’s pissing in your ear the whole time.’

‘Right.’

‘Flattering you. Then before you know it he’s talking himself up.’ Mac dragged a long branch to the centre of the pile. ‘I reckon half of what he says is made up.’

That sounds like him, Jozef thought, his head racing. A grown-up version of the boy in the barn. Doesn’t it?

Mac dropped the branch onto the pile then wiped his hands on his jeans.
‘Anyway, you can ask Sally tonight.’

‘Ask Sally?’ Jozef looked up.

‘Daniel Faber bought her painting. She’s one of his projects.’

Mac turned and walked back up to the house, leaving Jozef staring after him. He caught Joyce’s face studying him from the lounge room window, a quiet smile playing on her lips.

Around 4.30, a minivan came chugging around the bend and came to a stop in the mud ruts next to the driveway. The side door slid open with a grinding sound and disgorged its cargo of twelve half-drunk people.

The group picked its way over the mud puddles to the great pile of wood that was the bonfire, bringing with them an edge-of-chaos mood and a great deal of volume. Soon Mac’s old record player had been commandeered and Joyce was grabbing Jozef by the arm and taking him to meet a lovely girl — woman, he corrected himself — whom he guessed to be in her late thirties. Sally had brown eyes and long reddish hair, which framed an angular face. A diamond stud sparkled in the side of her nose and when Joyce introduced her she squeezed his hand and kissed him on the mouth, then stepped past him into the dark kitchen.

He turned to watch her go, stunned, Joyce’s laughter ringing in his ears.

After sunset, Joyce put him to work on the paella, which was cooking on a smaller open fire around the side of the house under a string of coloured lights. Jozef stirred the contents of the pan and let the sounds of the party wash over him, thinking, ruefully, that he would probably spend another night watching events unfold around him. But soon he was joined at the smaller fire by two young men, Jarrad and Shay, who amiably shared their bottle of whisky with him.
and struck up a conversation between themselves that seemed to be about surf
bbeaches but also about abstract mathematics.

Jozef felt oddly like he was back at the university, in a tutorial group that
had got away from him. He looked over his shoulder for Joyce. A minute or so
later Joyce sat down next to him. She nudged Jozef.

‘Ready for the prawns?’
‘Five more minutes.’
‘Mind if I smoke a joint?’
‘As if you care.’

She laughed. ‘Having fun yet?’ She laced her arm though his.

He turned to face her. ‘Any minute now.’

She grinned and handed him the lighter; he lit the end of her thick joint
and the paper tip flared in their faces.

Joyce let out a smoky laugh. ‘Damn eyelashes.’ She handed it to him.

‘Pass it on.’

Jozef passed the joint warily to Jarrad.

‘That Sally, eh?’ Joyce nudged him, eyebrows working.

Jozef looked up to see Sally approaching from the bonfire, a glass of
something in her hand. She appeared to sway a little and announced her arrival
with a breathy *haaaalllooo* before tweaking the joint out of Shay’s dawdling
fingers and planting herself between Joyce and Jozef. She took the ladle from
Jozef’s hand and passed it to Joyce, then turned to face him.

‘Are you ready?’ He saw mischief in her eyes.

He shook his head, heat creeping into his cheeks.

‘For what?’
Smiling, she gripped the joint between her teeth — backwards, lit end in the cavity of her mouth — then took his face in her hands and steered his lips towards hers. He caught the rapid gust of smoke as their lips touched and his hands gripped the loose fabric of her dress where it bunched at her hips and as she blew smoke and he inhaled (or kissed, he couldn’t say which) the dope hit his system and he fell back, gasping and spinning and coughing.

Sally passed the joint to Joyce and the two women shook with laughter and he knew that they were laughing at him and he was embarrassed but on the other hand he didn’t care and instead he dried his eyes and watched the embers leaping in the fire with something approaching awe, his old cock hard inside his unfashionable jeans.

Sally’s voice arrived from a distance. ‘My dress.’

The diamond nose stud caught the sparks and refracted them.

He looked down at the fabric still scrunched in his fingertips. He smiled and let go.

Joyce got up and announced she was getting the prawns because if she didn’t do it soon, they’d have to find their way to the paella without her help.

Sally smiled into the fire. He cleared this throat.

‘You sold a painting?’ His voice boomed in his head.

‘Yeah,’ she said.

She took a sip from her glass and offered him it to him. He took it and looked at her over the rim of the glass as he took a pull on the liquor. She has a voice like a country and western singer, he thought. My love, my house, my broken heart. My lips.
He pulled himself together. ‘You make good money on it?’ His heart was racing.

‘Yeah. Thirty.’ She nodded.

‘Oh.’ He licked his lips and tried to comprehend. The fire danced.

‘Thousand. Thirty thousand.’ She frowned at him, shaking her auburn hair.

He started laughing, rubbed at his stubbled cheek. ‘Oh. Wow. That’s very good.’

‘It was a very good piece. He’s lucky to have it.’

‘Daniel Faber.’ Faber, Faber, Faber. Still his voice boomed.

‘Yes. You know him?’

He shrugged. ‘Sort of.’

He stopped, confused. His mouth was dry and he felt he was talking through fog. Felt suddenly, urgently, that he wanted to change the subject and not talk about Daniel Faber or any of that sorry business.

‘Hey,’ he said. ‘I got charged by a wombat last night.’ He laughed loudly, remembering. The memory acquired a sudden hilarious cast. He told her the story, acting out the best bits.

She laughed hard. ‘Where does it live, this titan?’

‘Over by the studio. There’s a hole there, I think. A lair.’

He rolled his eyes. The idea of the wombat lair seemed to strike Sally as very funny indeed. He persisted, encouraged. He placed a hand on the small of her back, the thumbnail touching flesh above her waistband.

‘It’s probably waiting for me now. Plotting.’

‘No.’
‘S true.’

‘Really? Show me where.’

He helped her up by the hand and they stumbled up the path to the studio. He pointed out the moon, which was insipid but still magnificent and very soon she was pulling him in through the doorway of the studio and had him up against the rough plank wall, her mouth against his and her hand inside his pants.

She was still astride him, humming, tying up her hair, when they heard Mac light the bonfire to jubilant cheers. Then they heard Joyce shouting that the paella wasn’t going to eat itself, and someone let off a couple of whizzing fireworks. The floorboards were hard against his spine but he didn’t care. He watched Sally with silent wonder and gratitude.

She looked down at him. ‘You could go to Daniel Faber’s book launch.’

‘When?’ he rasped.

‘Tomorrow night. At the gallery.’

Tomorrow, he thought fuzzily. Tomorrow!

She tied a knot in the condom, kissed him on the cheek and left him there. It was her party after all, so she ought to go and talk to people. She stuffed her knickers into her dress pocket and blew him a kiss as she pulled the door shut.

He lay there, speechless, fingers sticky and pants around his knees until some crawling insect bit him so he stood up and tipped himself, dizzily, into bed.

Joyce drove him to Nowra station for the 10 o’clock train — her hangover, she said, would only get worse, so the sooner the better.
Jozef watched the river appear and disappear as the road wound around its contours, and he felt a loss at leaving it. He’d swum again this morning, walking down the track with Mac this time, the two of them diving in together from a big rock that overhung a swirling depth. He had surfaced, breathless, and watched Mac swim in long stokes across the fast-moving centre to the other side and back. It was a cold morning — the best kind for swimming, Mac had said. As Jozef swam, teeth chattering, to the shore he caught a movement in the underbrush. The old-man lizard, a goanna, Joyce told him, was dragging his body down to the water, watching him from tiny, ancient eyes.

Now he looked across at Joyce, who was peering over the top of the steering wheel.

‘You need to get your eyes checked,’ he said.

‘Thanks dad. So, Daniel Faber.’

‘Yep. His book launch tonight.’ It was superb luck: a public event with Daniel Faber at its centre. The perfect opportunity to spy.

‘What are you going to say to him?’

‘I don’t know. That’s not important. What’s important is seeing him, hearing him talk. Do you still think I’m crazy?’

Joyce sighed. ‘I’m rather proud of you, actually.’

‘Why?’ he laughed.

‘What you’re doing. It’s a very brave thing. And a very human thing. You’re obeying a natural logic inside you. That’s the best anyone can do.’

‘Thanks, guru.’

They sat in warm silence for a moment. The dirt road to Valhalla came to an end and Joyce turned the car onto the sealed road back to town.
He turned to her again. ‘Do you think you can tell when people are lying?’

She shrugged. ‘There’s some damn good liars in this world.’

He considered this. But the truth has a way of asserting itself, he thought. Of seeking light.

Aloud, he said, ‘I think people are fundamentally good. That they’re built to seek the truth.’

She laughed. ‘Jozef, Daniel Faber’s lived a long and successful life. Whatever he’s doing, it’s working for him. You think he’s going to take one look at you and confess an ancient sin?’

‘No.’ He didn’t know what to think.

Joyce looked at him quizzically. ‘I’ve got a question for you.’

‘Shoot.’

‘What if he recognises you?’

Jozef stared across at her, the idea and its implications unfolding in his mind.
Chapter 37

Jozef stepped out of the taxi onto the Darlinghurst pavement and looked up at the elegant facade of the gallery. It was a late nineteenth century building with a recent glass and concrete addition and it was set between tidy terraces. It was subtly imposing, which Jozef understood meant money and privilege. Chattering guests spilled down the grand steps to the pavement, illuminated by warm yellow light. The same light, emitting from inside the gallery foyer, enveloped him as he stepped forward. Immediately, he was tempted to turn back, as he knew he might be.

He stepped aside to let a young couple pass on their way to the steps. He caught a breath of the young woman’s perfume as she passed and swore quietly to himself. He was terribly nervous. But it was crazy to come this far and not go through with the confrontation. He shoved his hands into his jacket pockets and willed himself on.

He followed the couple up the steps, listening to banal fragments of their conversation. The girl swished her chestnut ponytail and turned back to her companion.

‘Anyway, it turns out she’s actually quite nice.’

‘I told you so.’

‘You always say that. Why do you always say that?’

‘Because you never believe me.’

Their exchange annoyed Jozef as he trudged behind them. Did the young always have such empty, circular conversations? How much they must love to talk about themselves, he thought, as if the reinforce their own importance. How arrogant, how mindless.
He pushed through the glass doors into the noise of the party and stood behind the couple. The walls of the large gallery, to his right, were hung with large canvases that seemed, at first glance, to be empty planes of off-white, textured paint. As he looked closer, images resolved themselves in the faintest greys and in the patterns made on the surface of the paint. Modern art often left him perplexed. The language of it remained closed to him, as if he was outside the secret. At times he’d also felt he should have an opinion about such art but was silenced by a sense of inadequacy. He understood the incontrovertible facts of bodily systems. Art was for the experts.

He searched the crowd. There was no mistaking Daniel Faber. Jozef’s breath caught as he peered at him. The man appeared as he had in Joyce’s photo; handsome, in late middle age with greying hair. His was a face that smiled often, he saw now. He emanated a sense of ease and accomplishment. He sat, surrounded by people and cameras, at the book-signing table in the front gallery.

He felt unsteady. My God, he thought, it’s really him. He took a step closer, his shoulders nudging the people to his right and left. He saw Daniel Faber was a little stiff in the neck and shoulders. He was approaching his sixties, Jozef guessed, but he had the rigid posture of an older man. His face was tanned and lined but, posture aside, it appeared that good living had preserved him.

Around him, the crowd stirred as Daniel got to his feet and tapped his pen against a champagne glass.

Jozef gripped the lining of his coat pockets and stared. The surging crowd pushed him a step closer to the front and his certainty began to fade, his stomach turning. Would the boy in the barn have grown into a stout man or a thin one? Should he be tall or short? Indeed, the face was rounder that he had expected.
There was a resemblance, certainly. Now he began to push through the people. As he drew near to the front of the crowd he felt a new confusion. Could he put his hand on his heart and swear it was the same man?

Daniel Faber’s voice carried across the crowd. ‘Thank you all.’

He waved an imperious hand. Jozef listened hard for the trace of a European accent but heard none.

‘Thank you. Tonight we celebrate a restoration. Tonight we celebrate the belated recognition of an artist who was for so long an outsider, who tonight moves from the margins of artistic acceptance to the centre. Many of us know the struggle of the outsider. Many of us wonder what makes the tide of opinion change, over time. But I have always known Valerie’s work to be that of a genius. I thank you for allowing me to put this into words.’

A fierce light shone in his eyes. A whiff of the evangelical, thought Jozef. That’s his madness, right there. Daniel Faber waved the book above his head and the crowd applauded, then broke into chatter.

‘So. Raise your goblets, friends. To revising history!’

A cheer went through the crowd. Jozef let out a gasp. He glanced around at the supportive audience. Daniel was popular, Jozef saw. He had friends, a gallery. He was respected. Jozef wanted to shout aloud at the unfairness of it; that such a man as this — if it is him, the boy in that damned barn — should bask in such a glow. He felt his knees weaken and the crowd surged around him. He was confused and he needed a drink of water. He tried to pull himself together.

A queue formed beside him, leading to Daniel Faber’s table. The queue inched forward. Jozef turned to establish his place in the column of people
waiting for a signed copy of the book. A bolt of fear shot through him. Now there would be no turning back.

He shuffled forward in the queue and felt something sag inside. It was hard to accept that his son didn’t see the world as he did. But why would anyone expect another living soul to see the world the way one does? He should know better.

The person before him stepped away from the table clutching a book. Jozef found himself staring at Daniel Faber, frozen.

‘Yes? Do you want to buy a book?’ Daniel Faber smiled. Jozef saw vulpine teeth, eyes sharp as a bird’s.

For God’s sake man, thought Jozef, the muscles around the left side of his mouth twitching with a sudden involuntary impulse.

Daniel Faber lifted a book from a pile on the table. He almost hid a quiet sigh. ‘Let me help. You pay Henry here while I do the honours.’

‘Oh.’

Jozef stirred himself from his blank trance and rummaged in his pocket then handed over one of the strange notes.

He received change from the assistant. Daniel Faber wearily stretched his neck from side to side, his gaze moving from Jozef to the crowd behind him. A young woman appeared behind the table and pointed something out to Daniel. His gaze followed hers to the other side of the room. The chatter around them seemed to have grown louder.

Jozef saw the moment falling away. Vapourising. He cleared his throat but as he leant forward he saw Daniel had scrawled his signature and was getting to his feet. Daniel held out the signed book to him.
‘Wait!’ Jozef found his voice at last.

‘My apologies, I’m expected for an interview,’ Daniel Faber said.

‘Could you dedicate it to me? The inscription. Please?’

Daniel Faber hesitated, irritation clouding his face. He glanced again at the corner of the room. The young woman pushed her glasses up the bridge of her nose and motioned to Daniel with a slight inclination of her head. Daniel threw up his hands in mock exasperation and laughed.

‘Ok sure, quickly. What’s the name?’

‘Jozef. Jozef Fabin.’ Jozef held his breath. Did he imagine a momentary flicker of discomposure cross the man’s face?

Then Daniel drew out his pen, scrawled in the front of the book and thrust it to him. ‘Here. Excuse me.’

He was ushered away quickly by the young woman, who whispered to him as they moved through the crowd.

Daniel Faber lifted his head. ‘Can I have a glass of the red?’ he called across to Henry.

Jozef looked down at the book in his hand. The scrawl was indecipherable. He stared, incredulous. Had it meant nothing to Daniel Faber? Or had he hidden the faintest shiver, as Jozef had imagined? The man hadn’t as much as looked at him as he’d scrawled Jozef’s name.

Jozef gripped the book to his chest as his cheeks reddened. He had meant to say: Danek was my brother’s name; I believe you have stolen it. But now the moment had gone. It was a bitter realisation.

You damned fool, Jozef.
He walked to the door, the cheerful clamour ringing in his ears. As he stepped outside, his foot collided with a champagne glass left on the top step. It rolled then shattered spectacularly, to a collective gasp. Jozef heard the glass crunch underfoot as he jogged the final steps to the pavement and set off quickly to Joyce’s house.

The next afternoon, Jozef stood opposite the gallery and watched Daniel Faber descend the gracious stairs to the footpath. He followed, trailing the man at a distance, feeling foolish at the cloak-and-dagger act. Five minutes later, Daniel turned up the street and entered a large modern building through an emergency side door that was propped open by a thick telephone book. Jozef hurried to catch up and cautiously stepped inside.

He entered a dark passageway and paused to let his eyes adjust. Ahead, he caught sight of Daniel Faber — he was entering a second door leading off the hallway. Light from the room fell in a strip on the hallway tiles. From somewhere, behind the door perhaps, Jozef could hear orchestral instruments tuning up — was a rehearsal taking place? Stepping softly, he followed Daniel along the corridor, pushed open the door and peered inside.

Jozef entered a large, tiered rehearsal auditorium. On the stage, some distance away, an orchestra was tuning up. He lingered in the shadow of the doorway and glanced about. He saw that Daniel Faber had taken a seat close by, in one of the back rows of seating. They were unlikely to be noticed from the stage, he thought. He urged himself to stay calm. He was shaking. He stepped
through the door and, as quietly as he could, he took a seat in the row behind Daniel Faber.

Daniel stirred and turned around. Jozef froze. To his horror, the man started beckoning to him and talking.

‘Don’t you love Death and Transfiguration?’ Daniel Faber was almost shouting over the discordant sound of the orchestra making its preparations. ‘My favourite Richard Strauss. Do you come to listen often?’

Jozef shook his head. He watched Daniel Faber stand and take a seat directly in front of his own, to make conversation easier.

Daniel leaned over the back of his chair genially. ‘The conductor’s the thing. I have the recording of Karajan conducting the Berlin Phil in 1982. Brilliant.’ Then a flicker of recognition passed over Daniel’s face, which turned quickly to alarm. ‘You came to the gallery yesterday.’

‘Yes.’

‘Did — did you follow me here?’ The blue eyes seemed to be taking him in rapidly, scanning his face.

Below them, the orchestra started playing.

Jozef saw the way Daniel’s hands gripped the back of the seat. He was terrified too.


‘No.’ Jozef shifted in his seat. ‘Not money.’

‘Then what? What are you doing here, man?’

Jozef got to his feet. He felt himself looming over the man, clumsy as a giant. He had strayed beyond the script; he was unprepared for this. And he was
both inside the situation and outside it; watching himself. Was violence expected? He was not a violent man. ‘I — I came to talk to you.’

Daniel drew back and glanced quickly around him. ‘What? Are you in your right mind?’

‘I came to talk to you about my brother, Danek Fabin.’ Jozef was shouting now, shouting the words into the man’s face, but still the sound of the orchestra threatened to swallow his voice. He drew out the sounds of his brother’s name until he found himself shouting into silence.

The orchestra had stopped. His brother’s name echoed in the hall.

Below him, he saw terror in the face of Daniel Faber. The man drew his hands above his head, as if he was waiting to be struck. In the distance, Jozef heard the conductor shout from the stage.

He turned and stumbled out of the auditorium into the hallway, his own voice ringing in his ears. He ran, then. Out into the street. When he had left the street behind, he turned into an alleyway, where he leant against the wall to catch his breath. He closed his eyes. Over and over, he saw himself as Daniel Faber must have seen him — a monstrous, shouting lunatic.

Jozef struggled home to Joyce’s place, but by nine pm that evening he was back out again. He was propelled, now, by an urgent need to end a chapter that so plainly described his moral delinquency; his total failure. The image of the cowering figure of Daniel Faber stayed with him. Shame burned in his throat. He saw his days in Sydney as a pitiful fiasco.

He stood under the grand arched roof of Central station. There were only a few people on the concourse, and a busker’s harmonica echoed under the
vaulted ceiling. He passed the busker on his way to the ticket office and paused to listen to the ragged blues.

The player was a young man, barely out of his teens. By his side lay a placid dog the colour of gunmetal, whose eyes lolled beneath heavily lids. Jozef rummaged in his pocket and selected a small note. He dropped it into the boy’s hat. He received a look of surprise and a quiet thank you before the tune rose again, its tinny note swelling.

Jozef saw a phone box and crossed the concourse to reach it. Once he was inside the old panelled glass door, he drew a handful of change from his pocket and his address book. He quickly dialled the Raos’ number, calculating the time in London. The phone rang out on the other end. Jozef hung up. The unused coins tumbled through the machine and onto his shoes.

His boy. God, it was agony to miss him this much.

He stepped out of the phone booth and walked over to the huge board that displayed the train departure times. It was two hours until the Nowra train and, having had as much lonely harmonica as he could stand, he crossed the concourse once more and walked briskly back outside. He looked around. Over the road, beyond the island where the buses stopped, he picked out the dark frontage of a pub. The faded hoarding said ‘The Mariner’. He crossed the expanse of road, dodging traffic, and pushed open the heavy door.

Inside the bar, the lights were low and the atmosphere subdued. The television hummed in the corner. Cigarette smoke lingered in a pall under a listless ceiling fan. The crowd, mostly men, sat in small groups and alone, drinking around the pool table and watching the screen. Jozef relaxed a notch; enough for sadness to fill the void left by panic. He was exhausted, spent.
At the dark wooden bar he caught the attention of the ageing barmaid, who stubbed out her cigarette and bustled over. He ordered a beer — a schooner, he was told — and a steak sandwich from the menu. He was directed to a corner of the room with plastic tables and chairs and sat at the only free table.

He thought about Daniel Faber’s eyes. Their flickering quality, the way they didn’t fix you. He remembered the uncertainty he’d felt, watching the man deliver his speech at the gallery. He recalled too the sense, no more than that, that perhaps he had the right man after all.

It’s a mess, he thought. There’s no seeing it clearly. Perhaps Joyce would be able to tell him what to do.

His steak sandwich arrived. It was a monstrous thing, fatty steak bulging from between two flimsy pieces of toasted bread. His gaze was drawn to the TV set and an ancient episode of *I Dream of Jeannie* came on the TV.

‘Mind if we sit here?’

Jozef looked up. Two men stood before him in overalls, clutching plates of egg and chips. The larger of the two was bald, his head a shining globe under the weak fluoro lights.

‘No, go ahead.’ He shifted to make room.

The three men ate in companionable silence. Jozef toyed with his meal, his stomach a knot. He watched the men playing pool and admired the way they casually missed the first few shots, exchanging satisfied glances when, on the next turn, they sent the coloured balls cleanly into the pockets. When they’d won the first game and a second, the larger of the two men sat down heavily on the plastic chair next to Jozef.
'Just arrived?'

Jozef nodded.

'Been out to the centre?'

'Not yet.'

'Ah, you gotta see it. We’re from Broken Hill. Work on the railways.'

The younger man appeared with three beers. He placed one in front of Jozef.

The big man continued. ‘Ever heard of the minmin lights?’ His eyes twinkled with mischief.

Jozef shook his head.

‘In the desert. These lights’ll follow you on the highway. Just hanging in the air.’ His hand floated, gesturing.

The other man laughed, ‘Oh, come on.’

‘Anyway, you should get out of the city sometime.’

Jozef put the gristly remains of his sandwich down on his plate. ‘What’s Broken Hill like?’

‘What’s it like? Jesus.’ The man shook his head. ‘My wife says living in Broken Hill’s like waking up hungover in a stranger’s bed. Can’t remember how you got there, can’t get out cos you feel too crap to move.’ He stood up. ‘You heading up to the station?’

‘You go ahead. See you there.’

A moment later, Jozef got to his feet and drained his glass. He watched the two men file out into the cold night.
From the empty station concourse, Jozef saw both trains pull in. Nowra platform fifteen. Broken Hill platform eighteen. It wasn’t an impulse — there was no heady feeling, no sense of recklessness. He simply stared up at the departures board in the empty station and a half-dozen thoughts battled for his attention.

He thought about Joyce and her deliberate patience. He knew she saw weaknesses in him and made allowances for them. He was thankful to her, of course, but he felt belittled by her generosity. He thought about his confrontation with Daniel Faber and the sense of anger and failure rose in him so quickly that beads of sweat prickled on his forehead. He was a fool. An impulsive, fanatical fool. He had let himself down.

He thought about his son, about the phone ringing in an empty house. He thought about how far they’d drifted from each other and how much damage had been done.

He made his way to the ticket office, then to platform eighteen. Broken Hill.
Chapter 38

Jozef heard the screen door of the Lightning Ridge post office swing shut behind him. The chill inside was a relief from the heat of the day. Summer had descended quickly; people said it was typical of the way the seasonal heat came on in this part of country New South Wales. It fell out of the sky, leaden. You just picked up and got on with it.

In the gloom, he saw the listless column of people waiting at the post office counter. Jozef found his way to the corner, out of earshot, where a high bench stood against the wall. He lifted his bag onto the bench and emptied the contents.

There were eight letters. One was for Joyce. Seven fat envelopes were inscribed with an identical name and address: Daniel Faber, Faber Gallery, Paddington, Sydney. He regarded them and checked a list off in his head: Broken Hill, Port Augusta, Coober Pedy, Alice Springs, Mount Isa, Longreach, Lightning Ridge. A letter written at each of his stops; each one a chapter, as it were.

The contents of the letters added up to a single, larger story. Some were just description of the facts as he recalled them. I remember this, I remember that. Do you remember? There were outright pleas for answers. One was a small boy’s memories of his brother Danek. It had been difficult to write that one as there was so little to recall of him.

He asked questions in the letters. How does one live? How should one feel?
The letters amounted to something. The sum total of an episode in a man’s life. A collection of things that needed to be said, somehow. A rationale, of sorts.

Travelling had made it possible for him to get his thoughts down on paper. The town names he rattled off in his head — Broken Hill, Port Augusta, Coober Pedy, Alice Springs, Mount Isa, Long Reach, Lightning Ridge — were just his landing places. He spent most of his time away from people, seeking the empty places in between the towns. He sought out shivering gums and dry river beds. He walked; it made the thinking easier. At night, after finding a place to stay, he would write. Hotel rooms, hostels, campsites. He spent many nights under the blue neon at the melamine table in the campsite kitchen outside Broken Hill, his first stop. The words flowed out of him then and his panic flowed out with them.

After that, he had craved a different kind of peace. He went out into the bush looking for the giant slabs of tumbling rock that he and Joyce had seen that day on the train through the Royal National Park, winding south to Valhalla. And he went looking for the wide river of Valhalla again; but he found only strange, parched water courses, where black crows circled above, crying.

He thought he needed to find the centre, so he kept walking. Out, further.

He thought, now, about the escarpment of the Royal National Park, seen from the train on his first day in Sydney. He recalled the sensation that had come on during the drive to Valhalla — of drawing away from everything; how it had thrilled and frightened him.
He had pulled at the ligatures that bound him to his life. It was an inexcusable act of selfishness. Yet he couldn’t regret it. In time, he would explain to Felix. He did not expect his son’s quick forgiveness.

He felt a wave of tiredness settle over him and he leaned his elbows against the bench, among the letters and stamps. He had been given a room in the hotel on the main street for the night, in exchange for lugging the kegs from the back of the Victoria Bitter truck that afternoon. Jozef tried to explain that he had money and was prepared to pay. But it was a thirsty town; the publican was accustomed, he said, to exchanging a bed for a willing pair of hands.

It was quite something to consider the new skills he had acquired on his journey. The university lecturer toughens up, he thought. He had noticed how the walking awoke a physical yearning in him. He saw that bodies are built to move. That was a lesson he would hold onto, back when real life started again. He forced himself to picture sitting with his son at the dining table in their Dulwich home. Soon he would have to return. He’d better be ready.

He rummaged in his pocket for his wallet and opened its back compartments searching for stamps. He found a solitary stamp with a watercolour picture of a kangaroo. He affixed it to the letter to Joyce then joined the queue with the other envelopes in his hand.

As he approached the counter, he tried not to think about the contents of his letters. Seven time bombs; or, rather, time capsules designed to bring back the past.

He imagined Daniel Faber reading his letters in his elegant gallery. He turned and pushed his way out the door and into the heat.
On his way back to the hotel he dropped the letter to Joyce in the red postbox on the corner of the main street. He sent her a silent prayer. I'm tired, he thought. I want to go home.

He hurried along the baking street. He stepped over the chain of a sleeping dog outside the butcher’s and stayed a moment in the cool of the awning. Then he strode out again, the hot sun bearing down.

Enough, he thought. I’ve done enough.

He placed the seven letters to Daniel Faber carefully inside the rubbish bin outside the supermarket and kept walking.
Chapter 39

Lena watched Felix as he placed each of Jozef’s postcards carefully onto the table between them. She shifted in her chair so she could read the titles of the cards.

‘Well, if I’d arrived in town and wanted to disappear, it’s where I’d go,’ she said. ‘More or less.’

She regarded Felix quietly. He seemed less awkward now, in her tiny, ramshackle flat. He was absorbed in looking at the postcards. She recognised a quality of thoughtfulness and detachment in him.

But he isn’t hard or closed, she thought. He would struggle, she saw, with the incompleteness of the record Jozef had left behind. Now she silenced his tapping foot with her stockinged one under the table. He glanced up.

‘Do you think old Daniel suffered?’ she said. She recalled the dreadful scene she’d encountered in the street outside the gallery. The shock of it still made her pulse race.

Felix ran his hands through his dark hair. ‘Who knows?’

The answer seemed to stand for the many other questions that remained.

‘So what now?’ She glanced at his face. The Bondi sun streamed through the glass doors.

He shrugged, picked up the postcards and tucked them slowly into an envelope.

A low note of pity chimed inside her. She stood up and walked around the table until she was next to him.

‘Philip Larkin. Your parents fuck you up. You know that poem?’
‘Sort of. They fuck you up your mum and dad, they may not mean to but
they do, etcetera. So?’

‘So he was right. End of story.’

He laughed. ‘Are you telling me to get over it?’

She leant against the table. ‘Do as I say, not as I do. You know how
successfully I manage my parental liabilities.’

He laughed and took her hand. She looked up in surprise. Slowly, he
traced a fingertip along the inside of her arm. He reached the nubby end of the
ridge of scar tissue and glanced up at her.

‘From your pirate days?’

She bit her lip. ‘Something like that.’ She paused. ‘I’m sorry there isn’t
more satisfaction for you here. It seems a bit unfair.’

‘It’ll have to do.’

‘You could come to dinner later. Backyard pizza in Newtown with mum
and Artie and Artie’s kids.’

‘Ah. This must be where I get my medal for saving Cristina’s life.’

‘Not from me.’

‘Too bad.’

‘I didn’t mean that.’

‘I know.’

She fought the urge to place her arms around his neck. ‘Now I have to go
to Daniel’s funeral. Stay here and have a swim if you like.’

Reluctantly, she left him at the table and went to find her shoes.
Chapter 40

Felix picked up the backpack and the faded bunch of flowers from the passenger seat beside him and climbed out of the car into the street. Newtown was unlike the other parts of Sydney he’d seen. It seemed battle-worn and tired out. The terraces were tiny, the front doors opening straight onto the narrow pavement. He checked the numbers on the doors and walked in the direction of number 28.

He found the door of Cristina and Artie’s rented terrace half-open. He paused in the doorway as he heard laughter from out the back. He smiled to himself. It had been days since he’d thought about life with Jozef but now he felt a tug inside. He wished there had been more laughter at home — Lena and her mum were lucky to have that.

He walked through the pokey kitchen to the paved strip of yard out the back,

‘These are for you.’ He handed Cristina the wilting bunch of flowers.

‘They had a bit of a journey, sorry.’

Cristina giggled. ‘Let me find them a drink of water.’ She went into the house behind him.

Lena stood up from the garden table and walked towards him, sending him a What can you do? smile. She regarded him for a second, then planted a kiss on his cheek and took hold of his arm. The kiss sent a cascade of sensations through Felix.

Two kids, a young boy and girl, glanced over at him from where they stood in the corner of the yard with Artie. Artie was poking a flat metal shovel inside a domed brick pizza oven. He lifted a big arm and waved.
Lena let him back to the benches and sat down. He let his backpack fall off his shoulder and opened the drawstring.

‘I have something for you.’

‘Me first.’ She handed him an envelope. ‘Don’t read it now. It’s the funeral program for Daniel. Tuck it away in the archive.’

‘Thanks. Here.’ He lifted an old fashioned school microscope out of the bag. ‘I found it in a secondhand shop. Careful, it’s heavy.’

She took it on her lap, eyes wide. ‘Wow.’

‘You won’t be able to see blood cells. But I tried looking at a flea. That was pretty cool. Skin would work too. You said you’d seen skin before.’

‘Thank you.’ She was blushing, turning the microscope this way and that. He grinned. The moment he’d seen the old thing, he’d known he had to get it for her.

‘Cristina’s enjoying herself,’ he said.

Lena smiled and rolled her eyes. ‘Fingers crossed.’ She lifted the microscope onto the table and ran her fingers over the metal base.

He sat down next to her and took a breath to say something, at least, but Lena hooked her thumb in the sleeve of his t-shirt and stood up, pulling him to his feet.

‘Come meet the kids,’ she said.

The following day, Felix switched off the engine of the Tilly Devine and regarded his surroundings. Pittwater looked good from the back of his boat; he’d driven up to Pittwater early, paid the three thousand and accepted the key to the motor an hour ago. It was very satisfying. Matt showed him how to clean the
sticky switches of the outboard — although there was hardly a speck of grease, since Matt had kept her so well.

‘Before I forget. One more thing.’ Matt had said, reaching into his rucksack. He thrust a chilled bottle of champagne into his hand. ‘Some fizzy for the relaunch.’

Now the boat rocked gently as Felix pulled the wooden oars from the bottom and fitted them one by one into the rowlocks.

He guessed from the map he’d seen back at Joyce’s that he’d rounded the top of Morning Bay and he would soon approach Joyce’s land on the woody point. Felix dipped the oars into the water and set off again to the patch of sand on the other side. It was past 10 am. The island ferry had just passed him on its once hourly circuit. It was a peaceful time to be on the water and the sky was bluer than a robin’s egg. He nuzzled the dozing dog with his toes. Jake cocked a lazy eyelid.

He rowed steadily until he reached a small strip of sand below Joyce’s headland, and threw the metal anchor into the water. He waded to shore then stood on the sand and looked up at the bush. Joyce had said he’d be able to see a path from the beach but all he could see was a tangle of knee-high grasses and behind that, the taller trees. He walked along the shoreline until he was at the end of the beach and saw it; a faint passage through the grass and into the trees.

Felix turned back towards Church Point, pleased with himself. He had a plan; it might work.

It was a shame the old man had never seen the place, he thought. Jozef might have enjoyed himself in a place like this. Somewhere you could ignore the pressure a bit. Joyce had told Felix there were rock carvings high up in the
National Park. Places only the local knew about. He would hike up there one day soon. Make a day of it; maybe take Jozef’s letters with him, read them over again.

He watched as Jake lumbered up and down in the shallows, chasing a seagull. Then he walked back to the sand, sat down and pulled his backpack onto his lap. He pulled out the present Joyce had left for him that morning. It was wrapped, hastily, in rescued second-hand Christmas paper, with garlands of fat angels blowing trumpets.

He tore the paper off and took out a cardboard box with a gold jeweller’s sticker on the front. He tipped the contents into his lap. His father’s watch tumbled out.

He stared at it, confused.

Then he undid the clasp and slipped it over his hand. Instead of sliding around on his wrist, it fitted him snugly. He examined the strap but he couldn’t see where the links had been removed.

He looked at the face of the watch and saw that it was time to head across to the point. Lena was about to arrive.
Chapter 41

They climbed in silence with the sun on their backs. The path was narrow and overgrown, and it wound in an eccentric loop into the old remnant spotted gum forest. In the humidity, Lena could taste oily eucalyptus on her tongue. Parrots soared above them and the tree canopy swayed, sending leaf messages falling into her hair. Felix walked a pace or two ahead. She watched the way his dark hair caught the sun every time he stepped out of the shade of the trees. She was reminded of the jet brooch at the gallery; its faceted, secret colours.

She scanned through the trees for another glimpse of the water. She had the sensation she sometimes felt at home; that she needed to see the horizon to orientate herself, like a spirit level for the mind. The path ascended the steep ridge then opened out and they reached the narrow spur on the top. She stopped on the track and looked right and left. The spindly gums were sparse enough to permit a clear and magnificent view of Pittwater on both sides.

She called to Felix. ‘It’s amazing, truly.’

He turned to her, smiling. ‘Isn’t it?’

They walked further out towards the water. Perched on the headland was a little wooden hut with salvage-yard timbers and leadlight windows. Long ropes tethered the eaves of the hut to the thin eucalypts surrounding it. The remains of an outdoor kitchen rusted against its grey flank.

Lena laughed, delighted. ‘Look, it’s held together by bits of string. See?’ She reached out to tug on one of the tethering ropes that crossed her path. The anchoring tree swayed slightly. ‘I mean it’s beautiful.’

She reached for Felix’s hand and stole a glance at his face. He was peering out through the trees towards the water. When he turned back to look at
her, she felt that a question — not yet asked — seemed to hang in the air between them.

He smiled. ‘Let’s have a closer look.’

He pulled her down the sloping path to the wooden hut. Lena let her hand slip out of his and followed more slowly. She turned again to the water. Below, a ferry was making an idle circuit of the bays.

She stopped a few metres away from the hut. She watched Felix tug open the swinging plank door and step into the darkness. She imagined stepping inside, the door closing behind her, cancelling the sun, the view, the trees. She imagined Felix’s face in shadow.

Who would speak first? What would be said?

She followed him down the sun-dappled path.
Meso-physical Journeys: Landscape and Transformation in
Cate Kennedy’s *The World Beneath*, Tim Winton’s *Dirt
Music*, Kate Grenville’s *The Secret River* and ‘The Snake in
the Rock’
Introduction

Contemporary Australian fiction portraying meso-physical\textsuperscript{1} journeys — that is, fiction describing journeys made by characters through Australian ‘natural landscapes’\textsuperscript{2} — includes Cate Kennedy’s \textit{The World Beneath},\textsuperscript{3} Tim Winton’s \textit{Dirt Music},\textsuperscript{4} Kate Grenville’s \textit{The Secret River}\textsuperscript{5} and the draft novel that accompanies this dissertation, ‘The Snake in the Rock’.

The term meso-physical is one proposed by this author to describe contemporary novels that portray character movements through the natural landscape: meso-physical can be translated quite literally as ‘through nature’\textsuperscript{6}. The multiple connotations of the word ‘through’, such as immersion within or interaction with, are useful in the context of this dissertation, which interrogates representations of ‘nature’,\textsuperscript{7} space and landscape in the proposed texts for evidence that they are portrayed as influencers — or agents of character change. This dissertation also

\footnotesize
\begin{itemize}
  \item[[1]] Meso, Greek, meaning through; \textit{physis}, also Greek, meaning nature.
  \item[[2]] Terms such as ‘landscape’, ‘nature’ and ‘bush’ are used provisionally throughout this introduction. Many of the terms used to describe nature and landscape are philosophically difficult and problems arise when using them in a post-colonial or ecocritical theoretical context. William Cronon writes in \textit{Uncommon Ground} (New York: W.W. Norton, 1996) that “nature is a human idea, with a long and complicated history” (cited by Scott Hess in \textit{Three “Natures”: Teaching Romantic Ecology in the Poetry of William Wordsworth, Dorothy Wordsworth, and John Clare} at http://www.rc.umd.edu/pedagogies/commons/ecology/hess/hess.html). The complicated history of the idea of nature — and this dissertation’s approach to using the terms to describe it — are discussed in chapter 1.
  \item[[3]] Kennedy, C. \textit{The World Beneath}. Melbourne: Scribe 2009,
  \item[[5]] Grenville, Kate. \textit{The Secret River}. Melbourne: Text Publishing, 2006,
  \item[[6]] See note 1.
  \item[[7]] The term is used provisionally.
\end{itemize}
interrogates a potential conceptual linkage between readings of nature and landscape in the meso-physical text and the concerns of ecocriticism,8 in which the human–nature relationship is scrutinised through the prisms of contemporary humanities scholarship with regard to urgent ecological concerns.9

This author’s use of the prefix ‘meso’ (meso-physical) echoes its usage by Isabel Strengers in ‘History through the middle: between macro and mesopolitics’10 in which Strengers explains that in the course of examining Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari’s11 concept of micropolitics (in the framework of the ethico-aesthetic paradigm developed by Guattari)12 she applied the prefix ‘meso’ in the way it is used in physics; the prefix ‘meso’ emerged as an alternative to ‘micro’ or ‘macro’ in physics. Strengers prefers the use of meso in her discussion of politics and history, because it enables a conceptual escape from the limitations of a micropolitical/macropolitical dichotomous view.13 She relates her use of ‘meso’ to the Deleuzian concept of thinking ‘through the “middle” — through the milieu (par le milieu).’14

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10 Massumi B and Manning E History through the Middle: Between Macro and Mesopolitics Interview with Isabelle Stengers, 25 November 2008: www.inflexions.org.
11 Gilles Deleuze, French philosopher; Felix Guattari, French philosopher and semiologist; works together include Anti-Oedipus and A Thousand Plateaus.
12 Strengers above note 10; see also Arnott S Liminal Subjectivity and the Ethico-Aesthetic Paradigm of Félix Guattari http://limen.mi2.hr/limen1-2001/stephen_arnott.html.
13 Strengers, above note 10.
14 Strengers, above note 10.
She states that conceptually, the prefix meso ‘deterritorialises’; in doing so it allows exploration of materiality:

The meso is a site of invention where the pragmatics of the question is much more alive, more vivid, more difficult to forget than the micro or the macro, which traditionally play a game of truth.

To extend this concept to draw out its relevance to the literary criticism of this dissertation: in the meso-physical text, the character who takes a journey ‘through' nature may be read as experiencing the landscape experience phenomenologically — as a material place — and as a conceptual site, imbued with longing, history, memory and personal significance. These meso-physical texts represent characters as being within the landscape.

This dissertation asserts that these contemporary meso-physical narratives, in which bush and landscape have an amplified significance in character development and in which natural settings are represented in precise and deliberate ways, use characters' movements within the natural landscapes of the texts as the privileged method by which to describe human experience. These texts are, principally, stories of journeys, relocation and experiences of place and space. In her introduction to Cultural Geography and the Place of the Literary, Sara Blair notes that scholars across aligned disciplines of cultural theory, anthropology and philosophy regard that:

15 Strengers, above note 10.
16 Strengers, above note 10.
17 Blair, Sara. ‘Cultural Geography and the Place of the Literary.’ American Literary History Vol 10 No 3 (Autumn, 1998), 544-567.
18 Blair, as above.
temporality as the organizing form of experience has been superseded by spatiality, the affective and social experience of space.19

It is relevant to this dissertation that in the Anthropocene era,20 in which literature and critical thought are viewed as responding to the ‘temporal torsions of anthropogenic climate change, in which time and agency are both radically dispersed and decentred’21 that subjective experiences of space may be regarded as having an elevated significance. Extending further Blair’s notion of sensitised space as a important carrier of meaning in contemporary texts, Catherine Nash notes in Disputed Territories: Land, Culture and Identity in Settler Societies (edited by D Trigger and G Griffiths)22 a tendency for contemporary literature to ‘turn away from ideas of geographical rootedness in favour of new spatial metaphors’ in order to discuss cultural significance of places.23 Nash’s comment suggests a rejection of the ‘fixity’ of places. By representing characters’ powerful, sometimes difficult, experiences of the Australian landscape, the meso-physical novel explores divergent and deviant interpretations of place and nature, wherein the assumed ‘truths’ of place, nature, history and memory are tested. This aligns with remarks in Susanna Lindstrom and Greg Garrard’s article “Images adequate to our predicament: Ecology, Environment and Ecopoetics’ concerning the role of the arts and literature in conceptualising the

19 Blair, above note 17.
20 See Crist, E. ‘On the Poverty of Our Nomenclature’ Environmental Humanities vol. 3, 2013, 129-147; The term ‘anthropocene’ is used to describe the current geological and chronological era, in which humanity’s transformation of the planet is recognised. See ‘Welcome to the anthropocene’ (www.anthropocene.info). Kate Rigby uses the term in her essay ‘Writing in the Anthropocene: Idle Chatter or Ecoprophetic Witness?’ Australian Humanities Review 47: 2009.
23 Nash, as above, 46.
human–nature relationship in an era of climate change.24 The authors quote Tom Griffiths,25 that:

all narratives are capable of containing complex and contradicting truths; the story is "a privileged carrier of truth, a way of allowing for multiplicity and complexity at the same time as guaranteeing memorability":

A multiplicity of meanings arises from the meso-physical journey, wherein place has elevated significance and where characters' immersions within natural landscapes necessitates the unfolding of manifold personal 'truths'.

This dissertation will review the discursive engagements between the meso-physical texts and articulated ecocritical concerns of the ‘Anthropocene’ era. Ecocriticism challenges the place of environment and nature in literature. It examines readings of land that define the natural world as outside and separate from the world of cultural production; ecocritical theorists such as Cronon, Buell, and Glotfelty26 (among others) review the effect of representations of nature upon human activities in nature and upon peoples’ perceptions of nature; they are interested in readings of nature that are conscious of complex ecology; and they question any assumed relationship between people and nature.27 As Cheryl Glotfelty argues:

Ecocritics and theorists ask questions like the following: How is nature represented in this sonnet? What role does the physical setting play in the plot of this novel? Are the values expressed in this play consistent with ecological wisdom? How do our metaphors of the land influence the way we treat it?

www.environmentalhumanities.org.
25 Lindstrom and Garrard as above.
26 Glotfelty, above note 8.
27 See generally ‘Definition of Ecocriticism’ in Cheryl Glotfelty’s introduction, Glotfelty and Fromm, above note 8, xviii.
How can we characterize nature writing as a genre? In addition to race, class, and gender, should place become a new critical category?\(^{28}\)

William Cronon recognises that ideas of nature are, in themselves, ‘contested terrain’;\(^{29}\) and that the human–nature relationship is one created through our descriptions of it:

“nature” is a human idea, with a long and complicated cultural history which has led different human beings to conceive of the natural world in very different ways. Far from inhabiting a realm that stands completely apart from humanity, the objects and creatures we label as “natural” are in fact deeply entangled with the words and images and ideas we use to describe them.\(^{30}\)

Australian writers such as Val Plumwood, Libby Robin and Kate Rigby\(^ {31}\) have developed the discourse of nature-centric literary criticism, ecological humanities and ecopoetics in Australia. Australian ecofeminist Val Plumwood makes the proposition that in order to arrest the exploitation of the planet’s natural resources and places in the ‘Anthropocene’ era, urgent revision is needed of the cultural perceptions of nature. In ‘Nature in the Active Voice’, she states that writers are ideally placed to enact this revision:

Writers are amongst the foremost of those who can help us to think differently. Of course, artistic integrity, honesty and truthfulness to experience are crucial in any re-discovery of ‘tongues in trees’. I am not talking about inventing fairies at the bottom of the garden. It’s a matter of being open to experiences of nature as powerful, agentic and creative, making space in our culture for an animating sensibility and vocabulary.\(^ {32}\)

\(^{28}\) Glotfelty, as above, xix.
\(^{29}\) Cronon, above note 9, 51.
\(^{30}\) Cronon, above note 9, 20.
\(^{31}\) Writing in the *Australian Humanities Review*, in particular.
Perhaps Plumwood proposes that writers have the skills necessary to effect a change in nature representation because they may be able to combine powerful observation with imagination, thus creating an innovative vocabulary for the natural world that is both rooted in the required ‘honesty and truthfulness’ resulting from scrutiny and yet imagined in a way that is fresh and free from cliché.

This dissertation will ask whether Cate Kennedy’s *The World Beneath*, Tim Winton’s *Dirt Music*, Kate Grenville’s *The Secret River* and ‘The Snake in the Rock’ write about landscapes in such a way as to allow new possibilities to emerge for ‘thinking differently’ about natural landscapes.

For some, imaginative literature's role in ‘working out’ the human–nature relationship in an epoch of change is evident; as Moya Costello writes:

Emily Potter has stated with stalwart courage that ‘literary poetics’, ‘far from [being] irrelevant’, ‘can claim an engagement' with planetary crises (2005). Lawrence Buell argues for the productive relationship of imaginative literature in particular and the environment, describing the imagination as 'at least as fundamental as scientific research, technological know-how and legislative regulation' (2005: 5) as a key to today’s environmental crises.

With this discussion of the ‘role’ of literature in an era of anthropogenic climate change in mind, this dissertation will investigate a convergence of ideas about the ways natural landscapes are portrayed in certain contemporary Australian fictional texts and current nature-centric critical concerns. It will determine if these fictional texts meet certain criteria proposed for the advancement of nature–landscape

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33 Plumwood, as above.
34 ‘Thinking differently’ is a phrase Val Plumwood uses in ‘Nature in the Active Voice’: Plumwood, above note 32.
35 Costello, Maya. ‘To see: a literary ecological point of view (some Australian examples of ecocritical creative writing, with particular emphasis on the prose poem)’ in Harrison, Rose, Shannon and Satchell (eds) *TEXT* Special Issue 20: Writing Creates Ecology and Ecology Creates Writing 1 October 2013.
representation, which is argued for in contemporary critical theory, for instance by Val Plumwood: where ‘rethinking nature’ has been called a requirement or ‘basic survival project’.\(^{36}\) UK academic Michelle Bastian echoes Val Plumwood but reinforces Plumwood’s call with a renewed sense of urgency:

In her essay ‘Nature in the Active Voice’ Val Plumwood makes the call for writers to engage in ‘the struggle to think differently’ (128). Specifically, she calls writers to engage in the task of opening up an experience of nature as powerful and as possessing agency. She argues that such a task should not be understood as a literary self-indulgence, but as ‘a basic survival project’.\(^{37}\)

For Bastian and others, the emphasis on the renewal of nature discourse is placed upon the preservation of ecologies and environment through a less human-centric understanding of nature. It is the intention of this dissertation to ask: what is the role of natural landscapes in these texts? Does this representation demonstrate an alignment with the goals of the ecocritical theorists, who ask for a ‘rethinking’ of nature? If it is possible to understand ‘places’ as having agency, where agency is taken to include the capacity to influence, effect or impress, can places command a new sort of human regard?

When concerns about place, landscape and history are viewed through the refractions of a postcolonial theoretical lens, issues arise concerning the obligation of contemporary writers to represent places and landscapes in a manner that is sensitised to traces of colonial impact. Gina Wisker writes that the writers of a colonising power

\(^{36}\) Plumwood, above note 32.

— settler writers — have particular tasks, that is, postcolonial literatures have a responsibility to unearth histories of place:38

One task of the settler writer is to replace the hidden history, talk of the struggles, centralise the marginal … 39

She goes on to identify landscape and place as central to this project:

[A]nother is to bring this new landscape and its ways into people’s minds through writing of it.40

In contrast, the potential reverse impact of fiction on history-making is also recognised — an example here is Tom Griffiths who, in his Text article ‘The intriguing dance of history and fiction’41 asserts, drawing on the work of novelists Eleanor Dark and Kate Grenville, poet and historian Judith Wright, and the historians Inga Clendinnen, Grace Karskens and Ross Gibson, the different responsibilities incumbent on the author of fiction as distinct from the responsibilities of the historian.42 In this dissertation, it is Kate Grenville's novel The Secret River that sparks discussion on this issue.43

It is possible to recognise an alignment in the positions taken by the postcolonial and ecocritical thinkers on the issue of writing about place and landscape. Val Plumwood concurs with Wisker, writing that: ‘[r]ecovering a storied sense of land and place is a crucial part of the restoration of meaning.’44 Yet for Plumwood, ‘restoration of

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39 Wisker, as above.
40 Wisker, above note 38.
42 Griffiths, as above.
43 See also Lynch G ‘Apocryphal stories in Kate Grenville's Searching for the Secret River’ *TEXT* Vol 13 No 1 April 2009.
meaning’⁴⁵ also means viewing the natural landscape itself — its unique ecology, its right to be left alone — as somehow central; and viewing the land itself as an active agent.⁴⁶

In Cate Kennedy’s *The World Beneath*, Tim Winton’s *Dirt Music*, Kate Grenville’s *The Secret River* and ‘The Snake in the Rock’, characters make significant journeys to or through a natural landscape, and their physical journeys precipitate psychological or spiritual ones. In applying the label ‘meso-physical’ to these texts, this dissertation asserts that in these texts, natural landscapes are capable of affecting people strongly; within the narrative, natural places exert a disruptive influence upon the characters physically, upon the characters’ consciousness and upon characters’ ability to speak and listen. It is the assertion of this dissertation that this representation of the agency of the landscape within the text sets these novels apart and justifies their inclusion within the proposed meso-physical genre. In these texts, landscape and nature are not neutral objects; they are influential, surprising, powerful, difficult or incomprehensible. In taking this view of the textual landscapes, this dissertation infers a linkage between the conceptualisations of nature and landscape in these fictional narratives and the ecocritical discipline. Yet this dissertation is also concerned with the spirit of the change that results for the character, from his or her involvement with nature in Cate Kennedy’s *The World Beneath*, Tim Winton’s *Dirt Music*, Kate Grenville’s *The Secret River* and ‘The Snake in the Rock’. As indicated, this author has drawn together the novels as examples of a meso-physical genre, which adopt the strategy of placing characters within (or passing though) Australian bush landscapes in order to stimulate significant change and which portray the natural landscape as a

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⁴⁵ Plumwood, as above.
⁴⁶ Plumwood, above note 44.
complex agent in the process of character change: to add to this construct of the mesophysical genre, I propose that the process of change which enables release and transformation, and which occurs when characters venture into the natural landscape, results in metanoia — that is, a change of a distinctly spiritual or psychological nature, involving the revision of previously held ideas.\textsuperscript{47}

The term metanoia has, before now, been used to describe the spiritual process of conversion. For example, see the use of the term in Rosemary R Reuther’s article ‘Feminist Metanoia and Soul-Making’,\textsuperscript{48} in which she defines metanoia as:

both sudden insight and also slow maturation of a grounded self in relationship or community, able to be both self affirming and other affirming in life enhancing mutuality. It is both a gift and a task, grace and work.\textsuperscript{49}

Its usage in this context is asserted as follows: in Cate Kennedy’s The World Beneath, Tim Winton’s Dirt Music and Kate Grenville’s The Secret River, a confrontational or transforming encounter with nature enables a new way of seeing oneself. This in turn enables a release from, acknowledgement of or acceptance of a troubled past. In these texts, changes to self-perception enable a larger dismantling and reconfiguration of the personal historical narratives of family and history that have limited self-development, growth and individual progress. Metanoia evokes a breakdown, then — and a reinvention.

William Cronon remarks on the distinctive cultural expectation that ‘wild’ nature (as it is understood within anthropocentric narratives of nature) will force changes:

\textsuperscript{47}Metanoia: a transformative change of heart; especially a spiritual conversion; Greek, from metanoiein to change one's mind, repent, from meta- + noein to think, from nous mind. Sourced from merriam-webster.com.


\textsuperscript{49}Reuther, as above.
The romantic legacy means that wilderness is more a state of mind than a fact of nature, and that the state of mind that today most defines wilderness is wonder. The striking power of the wild is that wonder in the face of it requires no act of will, but forces itself upon us …[.]

This dissertation argues that the meso-physical text may be interpreted as using the trope of the apocryphal Australian natural landscape to, in forcing wonder, provoke fundamental changes to construction of self and identity. Cronon notes that an encounter with wilderness is to ‘see otherness’. Interestingly, Cronon describes the importance of this recognition of ‘otherness’ in provoking a fundamental re-assessment of what is regarded as ‘natural’ — that is, all nature not just that viewed as pristine and iconic:

By seeing otherness in that which is most unfamiliar, we can learn to see it too in that which first seemed ordinary.

In the meso-physical narrative, an encounter with externalised otherness may also be read as illuminating a character's internalised alterity — that is, characters’ internal stories of ‘otherness’ that emerge counter to or alongside a character's dominant constructed narratives of selfhood. This notion of characters being required to explore stories and constructs of identity is explored in the textual analyses in Chapter 2.

Cronon, above note 9, 88.

Cronon, above note 9, 88.

Cronon, above note 9, 88

Alterity: otherness.

Consider here, for example, Judith Butler’s notion of ‘gender performativity’ — that identity is expressed and not inherent — in Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity. NY: Routledge 1990. Also consider the fundamental tenets of Narrative Therapy (Michael White, for example): relying on the poststructural notion of self and identity as a series of narratives, among which the dominant stories of self tell a subject ‘whom’ he or she is.
Metanoia is brought about through an encounter with a ‘sublime’ landscape: in this regard, the novels chosen here contain a remnant of a distinctly Romantic view of nature, where nature is powerful, provocative and cathartic. 55 Indeed, in the Australian context, contemporary stories that portray the natural landscape as a cause for characters reaching a state of metanoia (that is, change of a spiritual or psychological nature, resulting in transformation and release) may be read as conducting a dialogue with, or making reference to, a cross-disciplinary and influential body of literature and theory, dating from the philosophy and writing of Romanticism, via Australian fiction of the colonial era, to the fiction and criticism of the present. This dissertation is particularly concerned with the linkages these contemporary texts make with notions of the Romantic 'sublime'. 56 This dissertation draws a connection between the notion of a ‘sublime’ landscape 57 that induces a sense of wonder and provokes metanoia and the notion of nature–landscape as a place of refuge and reinvention.

A perception of nature as a cause of sensory excitement or liberating force derives from Rousseauian–Romantic notions: Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and later many of the writers, artists and composers of the European Romantic era 58 rejected the philosophical constraints of Enlightenment reason in favour of an artistic preference for senses, impulses and emotions. Romanticism’s rejection of the strictures of

55 See Cronon on Thoreau: Cronon, above note 9, 75-75.
56 Cronon, above note 9.
57 The term ‘sublime’ is used provisionally; in Chapter 1 a suitable definition for the idea of sublimity in this context is proposed.
58 While definitions of the Romantic period differ, most artistic activity associated with Romanticism occurred in the mid 1700s to the mid 1800s.
Classical form was expressed in awe of the power, majesty, grandeur and beauty evident in nature.  

Metanoia takes place for the characters in Cate Kennedy’s *The World Beneath*, Tim Winton’s *Dirt Music* and Kate Grenville’s *The Secret River* through those characters’ vigorous interactions with a forceful natural world. Character transformation is brought about through violence and rupture: passive, reflective or neutral interaction between individual and environment have no place in this scheme. The considerable harshness and variability of Australian natural environments may be regarded as an important influence upon writers producing literary landscapes that are capable of such violence. This dissertation investigates the violent aspects of meso-physical character–nature interactions in Cate Kennedy’s *The World Beneath*, Tim Winton’s *Dirt Music*, Kate Grenville’s *The Secret River* and ‘The Snake in the Rock’, in order to discover if potent versions of nature are represented in these texts.

Kennedy's, Winton's and Grenville's meso-physical texts may be regarded as having a collective significance; that is, taken together, they may be regarded as demonstrating a distinct type of settler-storytelling, in which the texts display a heightened awareness of and sensitivity to the historicised nature of place, landscape and geography. The settler, in this instance, is the white visitor to the Australian landscape. It is within the scope of this dissertation to ask: does using the trope of the white visitor in colonised space in the contemporary Australian novel indicate an immediate problematising of the human–nature relationship? This dissertation will

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60 Wisker, above note 38.
review the work of Stephen Muecke\(^{61}\) and Ross Gibson,\(^{62}\) whose review of Australian texts and film has generated cross-disciplinary study concerned with the mythopoetics\(^{63}\) of representations of the Australian bush landscape and the assertions of ‘Australianness’\(^{64}\) arising. These texts contain an echo of contemporary critical re-readings of Australian colonial bush narratives, in which the representation of Australian landscapes were a central concern.\(^{65}\) In particular, Cate Kennedy’s \textit{The World Beneath}, Tim Winton’s \textit{Dirt Music} and Kate Grenville’s \textit{The Secret River} invoke literary antecedents that may be broadly described as ‘Australian landscape Gothic’\(^{66}\) — that is, these contemporary texts recall literary antecedents that represent the Australian landscape as fearful and strange and possessing the capacity to subject outsiders to harm, confusion or profound change. Texts by writers such as Joan Lindsay, Barbara Baynton, Rosa Praed and Tasma express this inflected Australian-settler sense of profound landscape anxiety.\(^{67}\) Art historian and environmental lawyer Tim Bonyhady notes that within critical theory the notion of a pervasive colonial nature-dysphoria has become accepted and largely goes unchallenged: he notes in \textit{The Colonial Earth} that it has become acceptable to describe the colonial settlers as


\(^{63}\) Also mythopoetic; pertaining to myth-making, particularly national myth.

\(^{64}\) Gibson, above note 62.


\(^{66}\) In using this term, I wish to signify that I am speaking about the sombre and nightmarish qualities of colonial and post-colonial Australian writing in which \textit{landscape} is the source of fear. On Gothic qualities in Australian colonial and post colonial writing generally, see Turcotte, G. \textit{Peripheral Fear: Transformations of the Gothic in Australian and Canadian Fiction}. Brussels: PIE Peter Lang, 2009.

\(^{67}\) See note 65.
suffering a great disconnection from and fear of the Australian bush — and the
eucalypt became the icon of that unintelligible quality:

The cliché would have it that the invaders saw the eucalypt as a symbol of
everything that was different — and wrong — about their new home.68

He also quotes Jock Marshall, a twentieth century explorer and contemporary of
Russell Drysdale’s, from 1966:

The bush, to our great grandfathers, was the enemy: it brooded somberly
outside their brave and often pathetic little attempts at civilization; it crowded
in on them at times of drought and flood. It, not they, was alien.69

While Tim Bonyhady contends that there are other readings of the relationship
between settler and land — readings that explore early attempts at conservation and
ethical land management70 — this dissertation is interested in examining the meso-
physical texts for twenty-first century expressions of the distinctly gothic strain in
landscape representation in Australian literature.

This dissertation accompanies a creative submission ‘The Snake in the Rock’.
Accordingly, my analysis of this creative submission also includes exegetical
reflections. During the writing of ‘The Snake in the Rock’ decision-making was
informed by two personal interests; first, in the notion that landscape or place may be
a catalyst for change; second, in the experiences of war-time refugees. Using the
focalising methodologies of autoethnography71 and practice led research,72 this

Note that he disagrees with this theory and argues, instead, that the colonists were fond of and
connected to the bush.
Marshall, quoted in Bonyhady, as above, 3.
70 Bonyhady, above note 68, 3.
71 Autoethnography – a qualitative research method that combines characteristics of
ethnography and autobiography. Pace, Stephen. ‘Writing the self into research: Using
dissertation will insert relevant personal reflections into the sections where my own work is discussed. Those observations are included in the exegetical component of the textual analysis in chapter 2 and are evaluated through the lens of practice-led research, whereby critical insights emerging from my process of creative development are reflected back into the creative process. For example, it is my observation that natural landscapes can and do evoke strong intellectual and emotional responses — responses which provide rich material for writers. The meso-physical journey can be a powerful impetus for writing. A rural retreat at Bundanon, for instance, taken during the course of the development of ‘The Snake in the Rock’, wrought a number of changes in my writing, as personal changes took place in response to my environment.

As indicated, the textual analyses that follow in chapter 2 of this dissertation take a literary criticism approach — that is, they undertake a close examination of the texts. As noted, these analyses are performed with reference to: ecocritical concerns about the representation of the human–nature relationship; critical thinking concerning constructions of identity; notions of the sublime in Romantic literature concerning landscape; and contemporary analysis of colonial and early Australian narratives of landscape. The exegetical and practice-based reflections sit alongside this and form the critical link between the critical and creative parts of this submission. The critical analyses are concerned with examining two parallel and imitative processes of change and conceptual reconfiguration in Cate Kennedy’s *The World Beneath*, Tim Winton’s *Dirt Music*, Kate Grenville’s *The Secret River* and ‘The Snake in the Rock’. I will

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72 See McNamara, A. Six rules for practice-led research *Text* Special issue: Beyond practice-led research Number 14 October 2012.
examine the proposition that in this group of meso-physical texts, a reconfiguration of stories of selfhood occurs for the characters as a result of their metanoic confrontations with nature; the central characters crave asylum or escape from the losses or limitations of the past. These novels commonly represent places as powerful receptacles of history and containers of experience. The characters in these texts are escaping loss, war, tragedy, family breakdown, crime, poverty, injustice and personal failure. They operate within self-imposed limits of personal constraint — limits that have developed in response to difficult personal events. When personal constraints are overcome thanks to meso-physical journeys, the characters emerge changed; they must also face uncomfortable truths; many are equipped with a renewed hope in the relationships that sustain them.
Chapter 1: Key Terms and Concepts

This chapter begins by identifying how certain terms will be used and applied in this dissertation. The intention of this process of definition is twofold. Some of the terms used here have multiple common usages or meanings. An explication of the conceptual complexity that arises from the different *usages* of certain terms (in particular, terms connected to human perceptions of nature, such as ‘landscape’) brings focus to ecocritical concerns that will frame the analysis in this dissertation.

In the introduction, I noted that the terms ‘landscape’, ‘nature’ and ‘bush’ have been used provisionally. Indeed, an explication of these terms elucidates a central problem with naming and labelling nature (and the difficulties that result, as a consequence, for any discussion of nature in representation); this is a concern for the ecocritical theorists introduced in the Introduction. While this discussion does not attempt, of course, to find new words for nature, terms such as ‘landscape’, ‘place’, ‘setting’ and ‘location’ are used in a conscious fashion, as explained below.

In order to signal the shift this dissertation will now take — from theoretical framing to literary criticism — I propose to use terminology used by Robert McKee in the popular creative writing manual *Story*. *Story* is not a scholarly volume; where possible and necessary, the McKee’s observations have been supplemented by scholarly texts. However, *Story* is used here as a source of introductory definitions to the issue of place and location within a text because McKee makes certain simple but useful distinctions. In *Story*, Robert McKee makes a distinction between setting and place. He uses the term ‘setting’ to encompass location, duration, period and level of conflict.
in a text. That is, ‘setting’ is the invented world of the text in its entirety (absent character, conflict and event). There are parallels here to the Aristotelian notion of *opsis* or spectacle. In Aristotelian dramatic terms, the spectacle frames the drama but is not the drama itself and is inferior to it:

Fear and pity may be aroused by spectacular means; but they may also result from the inner structure of the piece, which is the better way, and indicates a superior poet.

The combined aspects of setting enable a reader to infer the kind of story that he or she is reading — such as whether it is realistic or fantastical, whether it is in the past or the present, whether it belongs in a genre and so on. In the example of the mesophysical text, the reader infers from setting (or *opsis*) that the text is a literary fiction narrative concerned with characters who, in the course of the story’s arc, journey through or within significant natural landscapes.

According to McKee, the setting will not only signal to a reader the kind of story being read; setting will also determine what is plausible and believable in terms of the story. In this respect, setting has a human and social dimension. With regard to place and location within the story, he provides a narrower definition. He writes that: [l]ocation is the story’s physical dimension. This distinction between setting and location is helpful.

In this dissertation I propose to use the term ‘landscape’ to discuss the broader ‘settings’ (not simply ‘places’) of Cate Kennedy’s *The World Beneath*, Tim Winton’s

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74 Aristotle *Poetics*, accessed d via MIT open access classics library; http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/poetics.html
75 Aristotle *Poetics*, Part XIV
76 McKee, above note 73, 69.
77 McKee, above note 73, 69.
Dirt Music and Kate Grenville’s The Secret River, and, where relevant, the natural–physical dimension of these texts. In addition, as I explain below, I will use the term in preference to other possible terms to indicate that, as McKee proposes in his definition of setting, human and social significances are embedded in the natural–physical dimension. Here ‘landscape’ conjures the possibilities and complexities of the human–nature relationship.

My use of ‘landscape’ (as a term intended to contain the broader aspects of setting defined by McKee) aligns with David Lodge's view of ‘The Sense of Place’, from his essay series The Art of Fiction. He notes that authors (he contrasts, for example, Martin Amis' Money and Dickens' Oliver) variously use descriptions of places, mise-en-scene (streets, houses, visual cues) but also markers of class and privilege, social and behavioural expectations and experiences of travel to connote setting.

But is ‘landscape’ a suitable term? Its usage here needs careful explanation. The term ‘landscape’ is typically used to describe either the physical topography of a place or a representation of it. In ‘Landscape, Writing and Photography’ in Deep South, Sarah Hill captures the problems inherent in defining ‘landscape’:

Landscape is inevitably an ambiguous concept; the term itself is a slippery one whose meaning slides between the actual and the virtual, the real and the

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79 Lodge, as above, 56–60.
80 Here, I mean the term might be used to indicate physical properties of a place — for instance, a desert landscape, a coastal landscape and so on — or a representation of natural world within a picture or a text. Yet this distinction is also a false one: this dissertation accepts that there can be no unmediated view of nature where the ‘term’ landscape might be used to describe something ‘real’ or ‘actual’ in nature. The doubleness of this term makes it both attractive (in portraying multiplicity of meanings) and problematic (clouding precision).
represented. It means both the physical fact of inland scenery, and the representations of that scenery. Even this distinction between reality and representation comes into question in relation to landscape. 81

She quotes William (WJT) Mitchell; when writing on visual representation of landscapes, he states that:

... landscape is itself a physical and multisensory medium. ... [i]n which cultural meanings and values are encoded, whether they are put there by the physical transformation of a place in landscape gardening and architecture, or found in a place formed, as we say, by nature (Mitchell 1994, 14).82

In this dissertation, the term ‘landscape’ will be used in preference to ‘location’ or ‘locations’ when describing textual places. The term ‘location’ implies a certain neutrality of place, which this dissertation disputes. A landscape is a textual product; it is a form of multi-dimensional constructed 'scenery'.83 It is not a true facsimile of 'nature' any more than it is 'nature' itself: consider here the remarks of Cronon regarding human origins of concepts of nature.84

In addition, the term ‘landscape’ is used instead of ‘place’ or ‘location’ to expose and make clear that a system of authorial choices has produced that representation of nature. Authorial choices produce a landscape that has interlinked purposes: aesthetic purposes and thematic (or tropographic) ones.

Kevin Brophy85 remarks on the process by which applying an aesthetic code results in the production of landscape aesthetics, quoting Austen:

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82 Hill, as above, quoting WJT Mitchell.
83 See Olwig on ‘scenery’ in Cronon, above note 9, 388–389.
84 Cronon, above note 9, 51.
To seek the codes of beginnings and endings as if they are natural or necessary to living or to writing is to bring certain tastes, certain preferred rhythms, certain assumptions to creativity. … In 1818 Jane Austen recognised manifestations of this process in enthusiasm among the cognoscenti for Gothic or Romantic effects. In Northanger Abbey, she has Catherine and the Tilneys take a walk around Beechen Cliff above Bath:

They [the Tilneys] were viewing the country with the eyes of persons accustomed to drawing, and decided on its capability of being formed into pictures, with all the eagerness of real taste. Here Catherine was quite lost … It seemed as if a good view were no longer to be taken from the top of an high hill, and that a clear blue sky was no longer proof of a fine day … She confessed and lamented her want of knowledge … and a lecture on the picturesque immediately followed[.]

He talked of fore-grounds, distances, and second distances—side-screens and perspectives—lights and shades; —and Catherine was so hopeful a scholar, that when they gained the top of Beechen Cliff, she voluntarily rejected the whole city of Bath, as unworthy to make a part of a landscape. (125-6)

His selected Austen quote captures the notion that landscape picturesque originates in the mind of the viewer of the landscape and is in no way inherent to it; indeed, a form of erasure is implied, whereby human traces must be eliminated to achieve a kind of aesthetic perfection (such as Catherine’s rejection of the whole city of Bath). Indeed, Michael McDowell in ‘Bakhtinian road to ecological insight’ states that ‘landscape’ is nature with picturesque qualities emphasised for the benefit of the viewer–reader beyond the frame. Thus, the use of term ‘landscape’ here indicates that the represented natural place is an aesthetic construct; the imagery of the represented

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86 Brophy, as above.
87 See for example a discussion about Bakhtin’s definition of landscape in McDowell, M. ‘Bakhtinian road to ecological insight.’ in Glotfelty and Fromm, above note 8, 378.
landscape will be thoughtfully chosen in order to emphasise some physical attributes of place and downplay others.

In the context of the textual technologies of fiction, one might argue the aesthetic purpose of the constructed landscape is to create a rich imaginary environment that contains a symbolic echo of, and is therefore consonant with, the thematic concerns of the story. The meso-physical texts to an extent support this assertion: an example of this is the bushland of the Hawkesbury River region in *The Secret River* — an enclosed interior landscape, whose imagery readily supports the textual exploration of the interior psyche of the novel’s main character, William Thornhill. This landscape is discussed in detail in chapter 2. Taken in the content of textual interpretation through ecocritical or postcolonial prisms, the textual landscape is also an expression of the significance of nature and places within the story. As such, the represented landscapes of the text are portrayed, constructed and framed in such a way as to support the narrative and thematic goals of the story. *Dirt Music* is an apt example here: the stark and vivid landscapes of this text have a visceral effect upon characters and the characters are drawn into landscapes to the extent that places become powerful forces of movement and action in the text. This builds the text’s thematic thesis: that places exert their influence upon people in powerful and irresistible ways.

While the narrative role of the landscape may be to cause disharmony or disruption for the characters, the representation of the landscape generally works in harmony with the story’s other parts to support the thematic and aesthetic whole. Indeed, the use of the term ‘landscape’ here asserts the inseparable nature of place from action, change, motivation and emotion in the texts for study, as this dissertation describes. McKee’s notion of the human and social dimensions of setting is useful here:
‘landscapes’ may ‘define and confine’ \(^{88}\) the possibilities of the stories examined in this dissertation; that is to say, the places in these texts are more than simply screens onto which story may be projected.

While it is possible, then, to distinguish the term ‘landscape’ from ‘location’, where the term ‘landscape’ readily conjoins the contextual, authorial, human and social dimensions of textual places, the use of the term ‘landscape’ in an Australian context might be considered a carrier of confusing and problematic references. First, in its conventional use (‘landscape painting’, ‘landscape gardening’), the term ‘landscape’ might readily conjure an image of a cultivated and civilised form of nature. Second, the term ‘Australian landscape’ may too readily summon the images of ‘ineffable Australianness’ that, according to Ross Gibson \(^{89}\), have become a sort of ‘Australian picturesque’ \(^{90}\).

To deal with the first problem: as previously noted, Michael McDowell in ‘Bakhtinian road to ecological insight’ \(^{91}\), states that ‘landscape’ is a version of nature that is produced for human consumption. In reading McDowell’s analysis, one might assume that his concept of landscape is one that is cultivated, civilised and therefore easily compatible with human aims for its enjoyment and consumption. However, my use of the term landscape is intended here to extend the thinking of Cronon on nature–wilderness as construct \(^{92}\), that is to say, here the use of the term landscape denotes an understanding that the textual landscape is a cultivar in the same way that any and all extant notions of nature or wilderness are also cultivated within the human

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\(^{88}\) McKee, above note 73, 69.

\(^{89}\) Gibson, above note 62, 71.

\(^{90}\) Gibson, above note 62, 71.

\(^{91}\) McDowell, above note 87, 378.

\(^{92}\) Cronon, above note 9, 51.
imagination. Landscape, then might mean any form of represented nature, no matter how ‘wild’.

To address the second problem: a contemporary reading of Ross Gibson’s 1992 text indicates that perhaps, over time, the Australian landscape may be perceived as having acquired its own set of picturesque qualities. In 1992, Gibson wrote that he believed the Australian bush had become ‘a leitmotif and ubiquitous character’ in Australian cultural representation. He argues:

The feeling is still quite strong that the land at our back is … a storehouse of some inexhaustible and ineffable Australianness. … [I]t seems the Australian landscape is shimmering in the collective consciousness like a mirage, phasing in and out of focus, as a sign at one moment and as pristine nature the next.94

Ross Gibson identified a kind of Australian landscape representation in which the natural and physical attributes of the Australian bush are:

[T]ranslated and utilized as an element of myth, as a sign of supra-special Australianness.95

As Gibson notes: such a landscape ‘might signify nature but that is not to say it is nature. The very notion of nature is a cultural construct’.96 For Gibson, strong cultural ideas have emerged, in film, writing and the visual arts, about what constitutes a distinctly ‘Australian’ landscape.97

These extant impressions of ‘Australianness’ might be regarded as exerting pressure upon all cultural representations of landscape — that is to say, film and visual art

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93 Gibson, above note 62, 63; he uses the phrase in his 1992 discussion of the filmic representation of landscape in Australia ‘The Nature of a Nation’.
94 Gibson, above note 62, 71.
95 Gibson, above note 62, 75.
96 Gibson, above note 62, 75.
97 Gibson, above note 62.
viewers may have come to expect the Australian bush to conform to a certain ‘look’ or, at least, might expect certain well-known elements or features of the Australian bush to be emphasised. Bearing Gibson’s words concerning the ‘Australianness’ of the landscape in mind, this dissertation has an interrogative priority: that is, to probe to what extent these texts conform to the late-twentieth century picturesque ideal of an Australian landscape. It might be argued that the novels’ represented natural landscapes do, in fact, share iconographical elements in common. These texts portray natural landscapes that are ‘wild’ rather than urban. They are extreme or awe-inspiring rather than pleasant. They depict landscapes that produce feelings of fear, passion, disruption and discomfort. That is to say, these novels’ characters encounter natural extremes; and, as a result, they have an encounter with a form of the ‘sublime’. These observations will be explored more fully throughout this dissertation.

It is interesting to note that in a recent essay ‘The intriguing dance of history and fiction’ Griffiths includes Gibson's recent (2012) reflections on the difficulty of escaping the pressures of cultural expectation as they apply to his own writing practice. Gibson notes the difficulty of evading ‘the assertive and individualistic urges of colonialism’. Here, colonialism may be read as affecting not only what is said but how it is said — that is, colonialism enforces textual conformity with a colonist epistemology.

98 Griffiths above note 41, 15.
99 Griffiths above note 41, 16.
Griffith notes Gibsons's remarks regarding the limitations of form in his own writing.

On Gibson’s choices of form (fiction or non-fiction), on writing history and depicting historicised landscapes, Griffith writes:

His deliberately fragmentary and dispersed non-fiction rebels against the individualism and conclusiveness of the classically styled novel and strives for access to environmental or communal mentalities 'that reach beyond the bounds of single, sovereign subjects'.

To return to the question of 'landscape and the Australian 'picturesque', as identified by Gibson: this dissertation is concerned with reviewing the landscapes portrayed to see if they are aligned with the kind of landscape myth-making identified by Gibson. There is some contemporary debate among Australian writers about what constitutes the 'right' or most 'adequate' way to approach writing about Australian nature. For example, writers who identify as 'nature writers' seek to portray an 'authentic' form of nature. In the conclusion of this dissertation, I will examine assertions made by Mark Tredinnick in the preface to a US–Australian collection of 'nature writing' called A Place on Earth. Tredinnick (below in Australian Humanities Review) writes:

Nature writing, it seems to me, is literature written from the soul of the world, from the heart of the wild, from the mind of some actual places on earth. The nature writer is asked to remember the earth – this living, breathing, eternally shifting, violent and tranquil planet that is mankind's only home – in every sentence they write, no matter what that sentence has in its sights.

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100 Griffiths above note 41, 16.
This dissertation finds that paradoxes emerge when the position of the nature writer is placed under scrutiny: given the human origins of concepts of nature, can writing that asserts an elevated concept of nature be regarded as asserting a ‘better’ or more ‘truthful’ representation of nature? Or is nature writing a form of nature myth-making, albeit a more ecologically sensitised one?

Just as the term ‘landscape’ also has the capacity to produce confusion, the term ‘wilderness’ is also important to this discussion and requires definition. This dissertation will query the representations of ‘wilderness’ landscapes as a narrative device. A useful definition of ‘wilderness’ is offered by American ecocritic Alison Byerly in the text *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*, edited by Cheryl Glotfelty and Harold Fromm. Byerly argues that ‘wilderness’ itself is an invention:

> The aesthetic view of the wilderness that is part of the picturesque legacy … has taught us to value nature, but the criterion for evaluation is the quality of aesthetic experience a landscape provides. … The idea of wilderness refers to the absence of humanity, yet “wilderness” has no meaning outside the context of the civilisation that defines it.\(^{103}\)

Aidan Davidson writes that in twentieth century America and Australia, wilderness is regarded as a preferable form of nature; in fact, he asserts wilderness has come to represent the *only* authentic experience of nature, preventing other forms of nature (sub/urban forms, for instance) from being seen as valid.\(^{104}\) Wilderness is the preferred form of nature (the most valuable and most defensible) as it is the ‘truest’

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\(^{103}\) Byerly, A. ‘The uses of landscape.’ in Glotfelty and Fromm, above note 17, 53-54.

form. Yet Byerly notes the fundamental paradox at the heart of this notion, noting that wilderness is:

[A] scenic facsimile of wilderness, a mythologized image of what we would like wilderness to be. Evidence of human activity is carefully erased, but humans themselves are not excluded. On the contrary, their spectatorial presence is essential to the idea of wilderness.105

Cronon concurs with Byerly, stating ‘wilderness’ is ‘quite profoundly a human creation’.106

Taking Byerly’s line of argument a step further, a wilderness requires a human observer; wilderness as a concept is not possible without the existence of the onlooker who must name, observe and benefit from it. If wilderness is valuable because human traces are invisible, yet only granted such a value by the presence of a human viewer, then the concept of wilderness is innately paradoxical.

Cronon supports this critique of wilderness as spectacle,107 also commenting that wilderness is the construct of the observer:

Wilderness hides its spectacle behind a mask that is all the more beguiling because it seems so natural. As we gaze into the mirror it holds up for us, we too easily imagine that what we behold is Nature when in fact we see the reflection of our own unexamined longings and desires.108

Byerly also draws attention to the 1966 Wilderness Act (US), which states that wilderness is:

[A]n area where the earth and its community of life are untrammeled by man … which generally appears to have been affected primarily by the forces of

105 Byerly, above note 103, 58.
106 Cronon, above note 9, 69.
107 Cronon, above note 9, 75.
108 Cronon, above note 9, 75.
nature, with the imprint of man’s work substantially unnoticeable; [which] has outstanding opportunities for solitude (Allin 278).109

This law describes how wilderness gains significance only in relation to individuals’ intended uses of it, and that the quality of that wilderness is judged according to how well it conforms to our notion of an ideal raw place — that is, a place offering solitude and self-reflection. This dissertation returns to this issue in its concluding chapter, where a challenge is made to the ‘nature-writing’ movement110 on the basis that this same paradox underpins the ‘nature-writer’s’ project.111

Australia’s wildernesses are a part of the ‘Australianness’ identified by Ross Gibson.112 Indeed, Marcia Langton writes that the cultivation of what she calls the Australian ‘wilderness cult’113 is explicitly tied to the dispossession of land from Aboriginal people.

The valorisation of "wilderness" has accompanied an amnesia of the fate of indigenous peoples.114

For Langton, the notion of an Australian wilderness is founded on the myth of terra nullius whereby:

The current representations of Aborigines in Australia have a great deal to do with these reconstructions of "the wild".

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109 Byerly, above note 103, 58.
110 Nature writing is generally defined as a form of personal non-fiction, which takes as its subject matter the natural world (or personal experiences, such as travel, in a natural environment). Jim Hinch, from LA Review of Books, noted nature writing is often ‘An encounter with wildness, transmuted even as it occurs into an opportunity for self-expression’: Salon, Web, 28 July 2013.
111 See chapter 3.
112 Gibson, above note 62, 71.
113 Langton M. ‘What do we mean by wilderness? Wilderness and terra nullius in Australian Art’ The Sydney Papers Summer 1996.
114 Langton, as above, 19.
The popular definition of "wilderness" excludes all human interaction within the allegedly pristine areas, even though they are and have been inhabited and used by indigenous people for thousands of years.

Langton notes that such wildernesses are a feature of our national identity; tourists seek out this version of an Australian landscape.\textsuperscript{115} As Anne Whiston observes in ‘Constructing Nature’,\textsuperscript{116} it is paradoxical how much cultivation and maintenance goes into protecting these 'truly natural' places — many wilderness tourists in Australia might be surprised to discover the extent to which they are cultivated, planned and maintained (Whiston describes a number of famous National Parks in the US, including the iconic Yosemite, as 'built landscapes’\textsuperscript{117} for this reason).

Cate Kennedy’s \textit{The World Beneath} describes accurately an Australian traveler’s sense of entitlement to an authentic ‘wilderness experience’:

> Ahead of them stood a sign, an incongruous intrusion, the hand of departmental officialdom. Do not proceed further unless at least two people in your party are competent at navigation with a map and compass.

> Rich grinned, nodding. ‘This is more like it,’ he said exuberantly. ‘At last.’\textsuperscript{118}

Kennedy's novel considers this desire for wilderness — the ‘truer’ the better — with forensic precision. Both Kate Grenville and Tim Winton also place their characters in wilderness landscapes. This dissertation will argue that these ‘wilderness’ landscapes serve to amplify the characters’ sense of isolation and accelerate the subjects’ departure from the lives they have known.


\textsuperscript{116} See Whiston A, in Cronon, above note 9, 91.

\textsuperscript{117} Whiston as above.

\textsuperscript{118} Kennedy, above note 3, 232.
Writing on characterisation in *Narrative Fiction*, Rimmon-Kenan writes that placing a character into an unfamiliar landscape — that is, making the relationship between character and landscape an inverse one — can be used as a powerful narrative device to indicate character. He gives the example of Catherine and Heathcliff from Bronte’s *Wuthering Heights* who are defined by their alignment with the wildness of the landscape that they inhabit.\(^{119}\) He writes:

> The analogy established by the text between the landscape and a character trait may be ‘straight’ (based on similarity) or ‘inverse’ (based on difference).\(^{120}\)

The meso-physical Australian texts examined here, Cate Kennedy’s *The World Beneath*, Tim Winton’s *Dirt Music* and Kate Grenville’s *The Secret River* depict, for the most part, inverse relationships with nature, where differences between the character and the landscape are stark (the exception, perhaps, is the lone figure of Luther Fox in *Dirt Music*). Consider here Cronon’s remarks regarding the importance of the recognition of ‘otherness’ in wilderness.\(^{121}\) It would not be possible to create stories of dramatic metanoia, or personal transformation, when the character is confronted by forms of landscape that are aligned with and familiar to the character — say, a farm worker who is placed in a familiar, rural landscape or a city worker placed in a cultivated park. It is an important aspect of the texts examined here that the journeying characters don’t ‘know’ the land they venture to. This recalls Stephen Muecke’s observation in ‘A Landscape of Variability’ that ‘landscape aesthetics work towards the intensification of relationships between the subject and the object’.\(^{122}\)

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\(^{120}\) Rimmon-Kenan, as above, 69.

\(^{121}\) Cronon, above note 9, 88.

\(^{122}\) Muecke, above note 61, 283.
As Muecke suggest, this dissertation finds that the aesthetic and thematic conditions of landscape in these meso-physical texts work towards producing enhanced sensation in character relationships and a heightened awareness for character of the narratives of self — thereby opening the texts to interpretations about the meaning of the human–nature relationship.

With the inverse nature of the subject–landscape relationship already identified as a common trait, can other common ‘landscape aesthetics’ be inferred from a critical reading of these meso-physical texts? I suggest they can: in Cate Kennedy’s The World Beneath, Tim Winton’s Dirt Music and Kate Grenville’s The Secret River and ‘The Snake in the Rock’, the landscapes visited are commonly beautiful, vast or isolated places. These landscapes are visited by characters who are fundamentally alien or out of place in that environment. Furthermore, in the scheme of metanoic transformation present in these texts, a sense of wonder is pivotal to character transformation. Characters receive intimations of the ‘sublime’ or ineffable (timelessness, infinity, divinity, human frailty). A shared landscape aesthetics emerges: the characters in these meso-physical texts enter unfamiliar and awe-inspiring natural landscapes, undergo transformation and emerge changed.

Given its centrality to the landscape aesthetic of the Australia meso-physical text, the notion of the sublime needs some explication — and the manner in which the term will be used here requires definition. Philip Shaw writes in The Sublime that one who has an encounter which induces feelings of a sublime sort is affected by the sense or knowledge of something indescribable or something that human language cannot

\[123\] Muecke, above note 61, 283
adequately capture, is outside of reasonable thought and is, as a result, deeply troubling and awe inspiring. 124 He explains:

The sublime marks the limits of reason and expression together with a sense of what might lie beyond these limits.125 According to Shaw, the tradition of philosophical enquiry concerned with notions of the sublime includes Dionysius Longinus who examined the capacity of rhetoric to induce feelings of a sublime nature;126 Immanuel Kant who argued that the sublime is not empirically or naturally definable, it is a mode of consciousness;127 Edmund Burke, who suggested that the sublime is not located within the object or experience, but occurs as a result of our rhapsodic language of description;128 and more recently, Slavoj Zizek, who argues that in late capitalist secular life, the sublime is evoked when disruption — through violence or ironic juxtaposition — reveals the limitations of thought and feeling, and one is called to examine the possibility that representation itself gives rise to the ineffable and inexpressible.129 Yet while these definitions of the sublime vary it is possible to identify a common thread: Shaw notes that a sublime encounter is often a struggle. That is, to encounter the extra-rational ruptures and violates one’s sense of reason.130 Shaw captures the various interpretations of the notion of the sublime as follows:

[T]he sublime has stood, variously, for the effect of grandeur in speech and poetry; for a sense of the divine; for the contrast between the limitations of human perception and the overwhelming majesty of nature; as proof of the

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125 Shaw, as above.
126 Shaw, above note 124, 5.
127 Shaw, above note 124, 6; see Kant, I. *Critique of Judgment.* New York: Cosimo Classics 2007 (original published 1914).
129 Shaw, above note 124, 4.
130 Shaw, above note 124, 4-5.
triumph of nature over imagination; and, most recently, as a signifier for that which exceeds the grasp of reason. Common to all these definitions is a preoccupation with struggle … In Longinus’ view … listeners and readers are ravished or, more disturbingly, raped by the power of words.\footnote{Shaw, above note 124, 4.}

I am interested in exploring Kant’s view of the sublime further, in order to find a suitable definition of the sublime for this analysis. Kant wrote that an appreciation of the sublime is an aesthetic appreciation that ‘excites us’.\footnote{Kant, above note 127, 62.} It is not the same as the appreciation of beauty, which is innately ‘satisfying’:\footnote{Kant, above note 127, 62.}

But the inner and most important distinction between the Sublime and Beautiful is, certainly, as follows. (Here, as we are entitled to do, we only bring under consideration in the first instance the sublime in natural Objects; for the sublime of Art is always limited by the conditions of agreement with Nature.) Natural beauty (which is self-subsisting) brings with it a purposiveness in its form by which the object seems to be, as it were, pre-adapted to our Judgement, and thus constitutes in itself an object of satisfaction. On the other hand, that which excites in us, without any reasoning about it, but in the mere apprehension of it, the feeling of the sublime, may appear as regards its form to violate purpose in respect of the Judgement, to be unsuited to our presentative faculty, and, as it were, to do violence to the Imagination; and yet it is judged to be only the more sublime.\footnote{Kant, above note 127, 62.}

He notes that a certain agitation of the mind is associated with apprehending the sublime object:

\[T\]he feeling of the Sublime brings with it as its characteristic feature a movement of the mind bound up with the judging of the object, while in the case of the Beautiful taste presupposes and maintains the mind in restful contemplation.\footnote{Kant, above note 127, 63.}
The landscapes of Cate Kennedy’s *The World Beneath*, Tim Winton’s *Dirt Music* and Kate Grenville’s *The Secret River* are not landscapes which the characters may enjoy in a passive or peaceful way — the ‘restful contemplation’\(^{136}\) associated with the beautiful object, referred to in the quote above, is absent here. The mental discomfort that the encounter with landscape causes is discussed in Chapter 2.

Shaw notes that while Kant defines two types of sublime, the mathematical and the dynamic, it is the mathematical that interests Kant:

> In the mathematical sublime, the imagination is overwhelmed by spatial or temporal magnitude; the experience is too great for the imagination to ‘take it all in’ at once.\(^{137}\)

For Kant, an appreciation of the mathematical sublime requires a cognitive rendering of both an object’s magnitude and its significance. He writes that the sublime is a product of the disjunction that occurs when, in one’s attempt to estimate the magnitude of an object, imagination’s impulse to exert itself ever outwards comes into conflict with reason’s urge for absolute certainty:

> [B]ecause there is in our Imagination a striving towards infinite progress, and in our Reason a claim for absolute totality, regarded as a real Idea, therefore this very inadequateness for that Idea in our faculty for estimating the magnitude of things of sense, excites in us the feeling of a supersensible faculty. And it is not the object of sense, but the use which the Judgement naturally makes of certain objects on behalf of this latter feeling, that is absolutely great; and in comparison every other use is small. Consequently it is the state of mind produced by a certain representation with which the

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\(^{136}\) Kant, above note 127, 63.

\(^{137}\) Shaw, above note 124, 80-81.
reflective Judgement is occupied, and not the Object, that is to be called sublime.\textsuperscript{138}

While a full discussion of Kant's notion of sublime is out of scope for this dissertation, it is useful to apply in the context of this analysis of the meso-physical narrative: when confronted with vast, difficult, incomprehensibly old, isolated, spectacularly beautiful places, the characters in Cate Kennedy's \textit{The World Beneath}, Tim Winton's \textit{Dirt Music} and Kate Grenville's \textit{The Secret River} feel diminished by the landscape; the landscape assumes deific proportions. When consciousness fails to apprehend the image of the landscape within the framework of reason, feelings of a sublime kind are forced to the surface of the character's experience; the landscape commands the character to consider a spiritual (or extra-rational) dimension.

The sublime landscape can inspire wonder, awe and terror; Kant notes that the sublime object may be ‘monstrous’, ‘colossal’ and ‘horrible’.\textsuperscript{139} This links directly to Cronon's analysis of the place of Romantic ideology (and notions of the sublime) as they relate to the construction of the notion of wilderness: Cronon notes Wordsworth's evident 'terror' in his poem \textit{The Prelude}, that recounts the 'tumult and peace, the darkness and the light' of an alpine crossing.\textsuperscript{140} Descriptions of terror and wonder have a particular significance in the context of Australian literary representation, bearing in mind the rich Australian literary history of Gothic representation.\textsuperscript{141}

\textsuperscript{138} Kant, above note 127, 66.  
\textsuperscript{139} Kant, above note 127, 68.  
\textsuperscript{140} Cronon, above note 9, 88.  
\textsuperscript{141} See Turcotte, above note 66.
As the introduction to this dissertation pointed out, there is evidence of an inherited Romantic ideology\textsuperscript{142} in the way the Australian meso-physical texts position nature and landscapes: these texts may be interpreted as portraying nature as possessing the capacity to open an individual’s mind to feelings and sensations beyond that which is strictly rational. In this way, the character is set on a path that enables, in Coleridge’s’ words the ‘seeking [of] knowledge through the imagination’,\textsuperscript{143} wherein they become ‘habituated to the Vast’,\textsuperscript{144} where ‘the Vast’\textsuperscript{145} might be taken to mean the aspects of magnitude and significance that induce a sublime experience.

In summary, this analysis will adopt a quasi-Kantian notion that sublime is a mode of consciousness or state of heightened awareness, which is accessed through rupture and violence. By this, I mean that in Cate Kennedy’s \textit{The World Beneath}, Tim Winton’s \textit{Dirt Music}, Kate Grenville’s \textit{The Secret River} and ‘The Snake in the Rock’, characters find the landscape is impressive or overwhelming; their encounters with nature cause them to feel a sense of wonder and estrangement; consequently, they contemplate primary questions of human existence. They are forced to recognise human frailty and mortal insignificance; they glimpse divinity; they experience what it is to stand in the centre of chaos; they have a sense of the universe’s magnitude; they momentarily grasp a concept of infinitude. These feelings are experienced alongside other feelings that are more concrete and indicate self-awareness: loss, panic and despair. When they emerge from this experience, the characters’ new

\textsuperscript{142} As defined in this introduction — broadly, a rejection of Enlightenment reasons’ reductive power in favour of a view of the human mind as active and creative. See Blanning above note 59, 20.


\textsuperscript{144} Blanning above note 59, 21.

\textsuperscript{145} Blanning above note 59, 21.
awareness enables them to examine their personal limitations with fresh eyes. This means questioning failures in their own communication; examining the sorrows and hurts of the past; interrogating moral failures; and asking how the past can be integrated into the narratives of selfhood into new and less harmful ways. The sense of wonder (which is, in most cases, not a positive sensation; these characters experience wondrous horror and terror) is the emotional high point of the mesophysical journey. The sublime emerges from the fissure that rends the tectonic of the character’s reasoning. I will examine the transformations that occur for characters as a result of this sublime violation of the status quo — transformations that occur on the corporeal, epistemological and enunciative levels, as body, mind and capacity for speech are lost or disrupted.

As a textual device, the landscape that produces a glimpse of the sublime induces the extra-rational effect that expedites a character’s departure from what is known and understood, and prompts the character on his or her reflective journey. Note here the connection to Cronon’s observation that the wilderness landscape that causes wonder forces itself upon the viewer.146 The character must also accept a shift in status; he or she must realise that the sublime landscape is resistant to human attempts to understand or control it; he or she must accept powerlessness and vulnerability. When within this landscape, the character becomes aware that nature is indifferent to human notions of time and timescales thus become distorted; it is indifferent to material life cycles; it is not one thing, it is many; it causes an upwelling of sensation that overwhelms capability.

146 Cronon, above note 9, 88.
The main characters in Cate Kennedy’s *The World Beneath*, Tim Winton’s *Dirt Music* and Kate Grenville’s *The Secret River* must learn to accept that they are subject to, not superior to, the landscapes they visit. For example, in Cate Kennedy’s *The World Beneath*, central characters father and daughter Rich and Sophie must acknowledge the scale and scope of the landscape of Cradle Mountain, Tasmania. While they find the landscape at first unimpressive, they discover it is terrifying, vast and deadly. They have been too proud; they have underestimated nature. This landscape overwhelms them with its sheer harshness and its labyrinthine, perplexing features. Rich’s descent into unreason begins when they encounter a ferocious storm — and realise their miscalculation in having drifted from the path.

Tim Winton’s *Dirt Music* traverses a changing landscape from Perth, north to the Coronation Gulf. These landscapes evoke the sublime in different ways. Travelling with Bess and Horrie, Luther Fox encounters the ‘big music’ of the Kimberley. But it is in the Coronation Gulf when the sheer isolation of the place causes Lu’s breakdown. He discovers a beachside idyll, which is ‘sublime’ in a Romantically provident sense — there is an abundance of food, plenty of water and the place is teeming with life — but he learns that dangers are ever-present. The isolation, the need for constant vigilance and the physical toughness of existence in this landscape wear him down. He is clinging to life when rescue arrives. He, too, has overestimated his capacity.

In Kate Grenville’s *The Secret River* William Thornhill is at first attracted to the breadth, scale and wildness of the upper Hawkesbury. Space and freedom are what he seeks — and land is there for the taking, he thinks. The land is a seemingly untouched wilderness. This landscape has an immediate and intoxicating effect on William
Thornhill. His desire to own a part of it (the part of it which is, of course, already settled by the Aboriginal people) becomes a kind of madness. He envisions his future prosperity; this dream ignites a desire to seize a piece of land and protect this ‘claim’ in the face of evidence that the land is cultivated by the local Aboriginal people. Thornhill’s abject refusal to accept the evidence of prior settlement and cultivation drives him to a moral breakdown.

‘The Snake in the Rock’ takes a similar approach: Jozef is drawn to the south coast of NSW where he encounters the Royal National Park and is deeply moved. He travels to an ‘alternative’ rural community of artists in the Shoalhaven. For Jozef, it is a combination of both the physical natural location and the relaxing of social constraints that precipitates his breakdown. Jozef decides to go in search of a repetition of the wonder that he felt in the presence of the beauty of the Royal National Park and, instead of returning home to his son, disappears — that is, he travels through the rural towns of central Western NSW. In the act of travelling, he is able to contemplate the personal history and resulting gaps and silences in his relationships that have caused his despair.

The textual examinations in this dissertation (in chapter 2) demonstrate that the landscape aesthetics of the Australian meso-physical novel set the scene for violence; perhaps this violence may even be regarded as a defining aspect of the Australian meso-physical novel’s ‘landscape aesthetic’.147 In the texts under examination here, personal transformations take place through vigorous and sometimes violent interaction with the natural world (not passive, reflective or neutral interaction). Here, the contemporary texts echo colonial and early twentieth century antecedents in

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147 Recalling here Muecke’s use of the term: see note 61.
presenting the landscape as capable of doing harm. Consider this example of colonial Gothic, from Rosa Praed’s ‘The Bunyip’, in which every aspect of the landscape is perplexing, disordered and monstrous, and in which the trees inflict tears or scratches while the swamp sucks at them:

I don’t know how we got through the deeper part of the swamp without getting bogged; but we did at last, and reached the scrub that straggled down to the water’s edge. Here was dense, and in places impenetrable, foliage; rough boulders were lying pell-mell at the foot of the ridge, and creepers hung in withes from the trees, with great thorns that tore our hands and our clothes.  

John Kinsella, writing in 2008, noted a modern iteration of this violent story-telling in which bodies are hurt, damaged and corrupted by their interactions with the land: he referred to the ‘overturning tractors and drowning in dams, augers eating limbs and accidents with rifles’ that formed the standard fare of ‘wheatbelt Gothic’.  

Violence in colonial bush stories might be read as a reflection upon the traumatic break the settler–writers were required to make with the lives left behind — and, indeed, with the symbolic order of the world they had departed. Australian flora and fauna were unusual and strange; landscapes could not be understood within the transplanted Anglo-European notions of nature. European words to describe and classify nature were found to be inadequate. It might be argued that rupture and seizure, madness and confusion, when represented in colonial narratives about bush encounters, mimicked the estrangement from and dismantling of Anglo-Eurocentric

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150 See the discussion in chapter 3.
beliefs and language which colonial writers, thinkers and visual artists themselves faced; however, a further exploration of this is beyond the scope of this dissertation.

What, then, is the significance of representations of violent engagement with nature at a time of environmental crisis? If portraying a new form of nature is, as Plumwood and Bastian assert,\textsuperscript{151} fundamental to the project of understanding how to imagine a new future for the relationship between humans and nature, what can be inferred from reviewing contemporary meso-physical texts that depict a violent human–nature engagement?

One might argue that violence in these narratives pushes nature to the fore: it brings the political and social contexts of landscape and place history into focus. Cate Kennedy, for instance, situates her story of violence in nature (or violation by nature) within an explicit discussion of environmental politics.\textsuperscript{152} When one consider the uses of violence in the group of meso-physical texts, one might also theorise that the represented violence is a factor in the metanoic transformation; that is, violence pushes obsolete or outmoded constructions of self-hood aside, allowing new stories to emerge to test the newer, germane frontiers of social and personal experience. For example, the character who is lost in the wilderness (like Rich or Sophie in \textit{The World Beneath}) confronts a fundamental and egoist twenty-first century expectation that comfort and survival are guaranteed in a world of modern technology, and challenges the notion that we can be dilettante consumers of life experience, yet be sheltered from the risks inherent to our actions. The character who attempts to lose himself in the bush (like Luther Fox in \textit{Dirt Music}) confronts his own need to be found and restored to a human society he has rejected. He tests his own perceived need for

\textsuperscript{151} See Bastian, above note 37 and Plumwood, above note 32.

\textsuperscript{152} See the discussion of environmental politics in \textit{The World Beneath} in chapter 2.
solipsism against his need for social connection in a social world where survival favours the rich, the assertive and the acquisitive. The character who asserts himself to claim and own a place (like William Thornhill) tests the power he has assumed. He learns that personal power is conferred relatively; that it is illusory; and that power comes at personal cost. He must then question the deep desire that has motivated his actions (and, as this dissertation will discuss, the reader is then drawn to turn the mirror upon the society that produced the man and these values). Each of these characters is exposed to the limits of his or her world view and is encouraged to explore the possibilities that exist for interaction with the world when those limits are breached.

Yet it is also possible that when the violence the natural world inflicts in these mesophysical narratives is analysed using the frameworks of ecocriticism, where all assumptions underpinning the human–nature relationship are tested, a different picture emerges. For Cheryl Lousely, in ‘Ecocriticism and the Politics of Representation’\textsuperscript{153} it is important for ecologically sensitised representations of nature to portray relations and interactions between humans and nature in a way that exposes our interconnectedness and recognises the material realities of that engagement: it is not so much about restoring nature ‘in itself’\textsuperscript{154} — as a static, once-pristine object. Rather, it is about recognising the wholly human origins of the nature concept, the human interventions in nature, and past and future human–nature connections, particularly when scientific interventions via biotechnology and genome research

\textsuperscript{153} \textit{The Oxford Handbook of Ecocriticism} New York: Oxford 2014, 159 to 190.
\textsuperscript{154} Lousely, as above.
render a view of nature as a ‘static, unchanging entity’\textsuperscript{155} increasingly unviable. It is possible to hypothesise that the mesophysical narratives of nature–human violence belong with representations that portray a constructed form of nature that insists upon being more-than-other; it is a version of nature that is adamantly transactional and part of a broader human–nature–technology ecology.

The opposite of violence is union and harmony: the mesophysical texts collectively display a yearning for this too; a yearning that may be read as arising from a violent interaction and the resultant need for restitution. The trope of nature-as-refuge carries with it an association with narratives of post-lapsarian\textsuperscript{156} restoration and Edenic myth.\textsuperscript{157} In the context of Cate Kennedy’s \textit{The World Beneath}, Tim Winton’s \textit{Dirt Music}, Kate Grenville’s \textit{The Secret River} and ‘The Snake in the Rock’, this dissertation identifies a twenty-first century wistfulness concerning the restoration of some notion of ‘paradise’; this links closely to the critical work of Carolyn Merchant who, in ‘Reinventing Eden’\textsuperscript{158} notes:

\begin{quote}
“Sustainability” is the new vision of the recovered garden, one in which humanity will live in a relationship of balance and harmony with the natural world.\textsuperscript{159}
\end{quote}

In Cate Kennedy’s \textit{The World Beneath}, Tim Winton’s \textit{Dirt Music} and Kate Grenville’s \textit{The Secret River}, the renegotiation of subjective experience takes place for the characters on three levels: on the level of physical or corporeal change;
through the breaching of logic and knowledge systems; and in the realm of language, where the need to speak and articulate the experience of change is apparent. These levels of personal breakdown may be interpreted as mimicking ideas present in Australian literary canonical antecedents. Patrick White’s *Voss*, for example, provides a mythic prototype for Australian fiction concerning journeys of exploration. Since Patrick White’s *Voss*, it is axiomatic to equate a journey to the wild areas of our continent with an exploration of the limitations of self. A discussion of Voss is useful here because it helps establish the historical continuum of representations of human–nature experiences in Australian literature, into which the meso-physical narrative fits.

*Voss* begins in nineteenth century Sydney; Voss, a German explorer, leads an 1845 expedition into the interior. He is the commercial representative of the material interests of his territorially expansionist backers, yet he is motivated by the rather more metaphysical drive to discover what lies beyond. His complex interior narrative drives the novel. Voss’s journey ends in personal injury, breakdown and tragedy.

In terms of the failure of the physical body, consider Voss as he regards himself and summons fortitude, as he and his exploration party near the end of their journey:

Feeling his horse quiver beneath him, Voss looked down at the thin withers, at the sore which had crept out from under the pommel of the saddle. Then he did begin to falter, and was at last openly wearing his own sores than he had kept hidden. Vermin were eating him. The shriveled worms of his entrails were deriding him. So he rode on through hell.161

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160 White, above note 65.
161 White, above note 65, 363.
Like Voss, the journey-bound characters in *The World Beneath, Dirt Music* and *The Secret River* meet their limits, physically. Examples of this appear in the close textual examinations of both *The World Beneath* and *Dirt Music* in the following chapter.

In terms of mental breakdown, the antecedents are also clear. Consider Voss again, as he begins to hallucinate:

So they were growing together, and loving. No sore was so scrofulous on his body that she would not touch it with her kindness …

‘What is this, Laura?’ he asked, touching the roots of her hair, at the temples. ‘The blood is still running.’

But her reply was slipping from him.

And he fell back into the morning.\(^{162}\)

In *The World Beneath, Dirt Music* and *The Secret River* the journey-bound characters lose their logic, their sanity, their hope and their compassion. Reality has the quality of dreams and vice versa. Madness, confusion and despair are used to convey the effect of the apparently inscrutable landscape. This trope of the landscape being ‘unknowable’ appears in colonial and twentieth century texts — such as this example from DH Lawrence’s\(^{163}\) 1923 novel *Kangaroo*:

And the vast, uninhabited land frightened him. It seemed so hoary and lost, so unapproachable. The sky was pure, crystal pure and blue, of a lovely pale blue colour: the air was wonderful, new and unbreathed: and there were great distances. But the bush, the grey, charred bush. It scared him.\(^{164}\)

Character transformation through violent interaction with nature results via the loss of knowledge systems: upon finding him or herself in a territory full of horror and

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\(^{162}\) White, above note 65, 383.

\(^{163}\) Lawrence visited Australia in 1922.

wonder, a place so unknowable and undefinable, the character in the meso-physical
text finds all intelligible notions of self become questionable. Reason and logic are
surrendered during this encounter with the landscape.\(^{165}\)

In the process of contemporary meso-physical Australian narrative transformation, the
journeying characters must lose and then restore their capacity to articulate their
thoughts and feelings, in order to force a reconstitution of self. The characters in The
World Beneath, Dirt Music and The Secret River must learn to speak differently, to
come to grips with new words or to speak with a new truthfulness. In The World
Beneath, Rich, Sophie and Sandy must relate to each other in new ways: more
truthfully, with more clarity and free at last from the burdensome, ill-fitting narratives
of the past. In Dirt Music Georgie must tell the truth to Jim Buckridge and they must
communicate with a new frankness. Luther Fox must learn to speak about the past in
a way that encourages healing and resolution. In The Secret River, the characters’
capacity to speak remains limited. The reader must read between the lines: we hear
the tone of remorse in William Thornhill’s thoughts and supply the missing words.
(The reader also hears a second subtext: that the moment for speaking and listening
passed settlers such as William Thornhill by. They failed to seize it.)

As already discussed, this dissertation proposes that contemporary texts that use the
meso-physical journey to promote character change engage with their colonial and
critical antecedents. In summarising this preliminary outlining of the tenets of the
meso-physical text, I wish to draw upon Marcus Clarke’s famous quote that the

\(^{165}\) This is a very old idea: note that Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* (first publication 8 AD) was
concerned with the notion of natural transformation. See in translation by Mandelbaum,
Australian bush was nature ‘learning how to write’.

The significance of Clarke’s remark to this dissertation is twofold. First, Clarke makes an acknowledgment that he could not ‘read’ the bush — its language remained unintelligible to him, although he assumes that the reason for this lies in the failure of nature itself and not in the reader, because the Australian bush is perceived to be the scrawl of an uneducated hand. Second, it captures the idea that the untouched, wild Australian landscape represents a kind of pre-language and liminal state. As Andrew McCann writes:

When Clarke famously describes the ‘Weird Melancholy’ of the Australian bush, in his preface to Adam Lindsay Gordon's Sea Spray and Smoke Drift, he also evokes the liminal state in which interiority and exteriority, the imagined and the spectacular, slip into and express each other. The Australian landscape, in Clarke's evocation of it, apparently represents nature in its original, unmediated state. It is the embodiment of primal forms, of an atavism evident in the fact that it is also not readily intelligible: ‘In Australia alone is to be found the Grotesque, the Weird, the strange scribblings of nature learning how to write.’ Clarke describes the 'myriad tongues of the wilderness', the 'language of the barren and uncouth', and the 'hieroglyphs of haggard gum trees', suggesting that the landscape are characterised by an orality, or an inchoate kind of literacy, that places it before the work of literary expression. The landscape of the Australian bush, in other words, seems to function as an origin in a way that the already domesticated, emphatically cultural landscapes of Europe cannot.

McCann argues that Marcus Clarke writes in such a way to emphasise the ‘phantasmagorical’ aspects of the bush, in order to suit the taste of the readership of

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the popular journals of his time. Yet the passage neatly captures the central idea of the meso-physical process of metanoia: that characters, who are physically corrupted by the landscape and who become mentally disorientated, are plunged into an atavistic state. They are sleepwalkers, mute with fright, or incoherent and incapable of communication.

Indeed, to survive beyond the violent transformations they undergo, must find new modes of articulation — that is, they must learn to speak in a new way and make themselves understood within new narratives of self and family. In the case of the characters in Cate Kennedy’s *The World Beneath*, Tim Winton’s *Dirt Music*, Kate Grenville’s *The Secret River* and ‘The Snake in the Rock’ this change also describes the emergence of new textual narratives of nature–landscape — where nature is no longer assumed to be passive, external and a commodity for human consumption.

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168 McCann, as above.
Chapter 2: Places that Transform

Examination of Cate Kennedy’s *The World Beneath*, Tim Winton’s *Dirt Music*, Kate Grenville’s *The Secret River* and ‘The Snake in The Rock’ indicates these mesophysical texts use the journey through nature to progress multiple reconfigurations: first, as the stories progress, the natural landscapes trigger change in the character causing the character to revise constructed narratives of self; second, as the character change unfolds, the representation of nature as an agent of personal change opens the text to new interpretations the human–nature relationship — thus, the larger constructed narratives of what is human, non-human, natural or contrived are also subject to reconfiguration.

The texts’ portrayal of active, disruptive and transformative nature disrupts conventional readings of nature — evoking the call, made by Plumwood and echoed by Bastian, for ‘thinking differently’ about nature.169 This chapter examines Cate Kennedy’s *The World Beneath*, Tim Winton’s *Dirt Music* and Kate Grenville’s *The Secret River* and ‘The Snake in The Rock’ for these reconfigurations.

Cate Kennedy’s novel *The World Beneath*, is written in the realist style, with third person focal segments from the points of view of ex-partners Rich and Sandy and Sophie, their daughter. It was published in 2010. Given the prominence in the text of the impact of climate change and wilderness preservation, *The World Beneath* is readily analysed within the frameworks of literary ecocriticism.

The transformative drama in the novel takes place on a trek on Cradle Mountain, in Tasmania. Middle-aged photographer and former environmental activist Rich takes

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169 Plumwood, above note 32; Bastian, above note 37.
Sophie on a trek on Cradle Mountain. His aim is to use this experience to grow closer to his daughter, with whom he has an unsatisfactorily distant relationship. This iconic wilderness becomes a figurative trope through which to animate the text’s broader discussion about perceptions of nature, the environment and nature-representation — where the text probes, recalling the remarks of Cronon and Byerly, the entirely human origins of the concept of wilderness; where wilderness is a ‘state of mind’.\(^{170}\)

This discussion about the environment, climate change and nature-representation takes place literally (that is, as a point of debate between the characters) and subtextually (as inferred through analysis of nature-representation, story, event, and character). Cradle Mountain, by virtue of its unique beauty, its vastness, its harshness and isolation, becomes the focus of the characters’ conversations and thoughts concerning how nature is framed for human enjoyment and consumption, what nature must do to impress the viewer and whether landscapes live up to one’s ideas of spectacle. Indeed, the name ‘Cradle’ is an ironic reflection on Sophie’s lack of parental protection.

In the mind of cynical ex-hippy Rich, the Cradle Mountain landscape has become commodified for human consumption — as a sanitised and ‘dumbed down’ version of nature. Yet according to his own set of beliefs, nature also has a clear purpose as a kind of commodity: nature’s purpose is as a stimulus for personal growth and interpersonal connection. For Rich, nature has become invested with more-than-material personal significance; this concept (of ‘more-than-material’ significance) is identified by Freya Matthews as a factor in the process of nature commodification.

\(^{170}\) Cronon, above note 9, 88.
She argues against this overinvestment (and a return to an acceptance of materiality) in 'Letting the World Do the Doing'.

Rick is not conscious of this contradiction in his beliefs about nature:

Sophie would have received the card by now, he thought. So when her birthday rolled around — he had the date in his diary — he’d ring her and just sound normal. Just cool. Say she was fifteen now, and what with one thing or another (he’d address this later, obviously) they hadn’t been in touch much, and he was feeling the lack of it. No … that he could understand if she was feeling the lack of it. Thought it was time they got to know each other, adult to adult.

He’d read about the six-day walk through the national park in Tasmania in one of his travel photography magazines, and thought immediately it would be something that might work.

It is clear that Rich believes the natural landscape ‘might work’ as an appropriate site for a desirable change (in this case, change that will result in him growing closer to his daughter). In making this connection, Rich is acting on a Romantic conception of nature, that associates nature-experience with spiritual attainment. Rich regards the Cradle Mountain wilderness as providing apt dramatic scenery in which he and Sophie will act out a staged interaction.

Here, the reader is offered an acute critique of Australian cultural expectations concerning natural landscapes: in Rich’s choice to go on the trek with Sophie, the text captures the sense that by purchasing a wilderness experience, he also hopes to obtain a privileged form of insight into his life situation and relationships, brought about

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172 Kennedy, above note 3, 25.
173 Kennedy, above note 3, 25.
174 See Chapter 1; discussion of Romanticism.
through that heightened human–nature interaction. This recalls Muecke's notion of the idealised Australian landscape's capacity to heighten subject–object relations; or, as Cronon puts it, the wilderness' capacity to illuminate alterity and force self-examination.

Rich's actions are riven with irony. Kennedy's portrayal of Rich as an ironic character — that is, a character who seems unable to act without demonstrating the apparent futility and emptiness of such action; and who seems doomed to observe failure and inconsistencies in others, only to dramatise those inconsistencies through his own actions — contains recognisable traces, for this reader, of the paradoxical tension that bedevils contemporary self-critique, whereby appraisal of problematic cultural, economic or philosophical assumptions upon which decision-making rests also entails an appraisal of the impossibility of truly operating outside of those assumptions. (For example: an individual's attempts to become a 'conscious consumer' can result in illuminating the ultimately paradoxical nature of that intention.) These paradoxes are echoed at a philosophical level in the comments of anthropologist Roger M. Keesing, who observes:

Poststructuralist thought, in its concern with texts as pervasive fictions (e.g. Derrida, Foucault, écriture feminine), has been caught in similar contradictions. Critically examining the taken-for-granted of Western thought, poststructuralism has undermined the old dualisms — civilized vs. primitive, rational vs. irrational, Occident vs. Orient — on which anthropology's exoticizations have implicitly rested. Yet at the same time, poststructuralist thought, too, urgently needs radical alterity, to show that our taken-for-granted represent European cultural constructions. To argue that

\[\text{175 Muecke, above note 61, 283.}\]
\[\text{176 Cronon, above note 9, 88.}\]
our "logocentrism," our focus on reason, is a legacy of Greek philosophy, for example, requires a nonlogocentric alterity — somewhere — uncontaminated by Greeks. 177

It is clear that while Rich considers himself an environmentalist, he privileges certain forms of nature above others; and that he privileges certain forms of nature experience above others. He has clear ideas about ‘real’ nature and what constitutes ‘real’ wilderness experience; he will not be satisfied with some watered-down version of ‘true’ nature — this comes from time spent as a young man as a wilderness campaigner on the Franklin River. He derides the technological advancements that have been made in camping equipment during a visit to an outfitter’s store — he regards the protection and comfort offered by the new camping gear as somehow cheating:

‘Like tents — talk about leaps and bounds there,’ said the salesman. ‘Have you had a chance to look through? We’ve got Everest, Safari, Alpine and Hunter. It really makes camping a luxury option now.’

‘It wasn’t then,’ [Rich] replied with a laugh. ‘Sheltering under the dripping trees there on the bank, rainforest all around us, putting your wet clothes on the following day. And I mean thick, virgin forest. No designated campsite there.’178

However, Rich makes a fundamental error: he assumes that he can control his engagement with nature. This bravado causes him ultimately to place himself and Sophie in danger.

‘You know what — we could camp up here the night instead of staying at the hut. Then just walk down straight to Narcissus Bay in the morning, get there

177 Keesing RM ‘Theories of Culture Revisited’: see extract at www.luc.edu/faculty/twren/phil389&elps423/keesing.htm.
178 Kennedy, above note 3, 25.
in time to catch the afternoon ferry. Hour and a half, say, from the Labyrinth back to Pine Valley, then back down to the Overland Track, and straight on down to Narcissus. One real night in the wilderness before we hop on the ferry and back to civilization.’

She chewed her lip, doubtful. ‘So carry our packs and all our gear up there for the night?’

‘Sure. It’s only six kilometers. Give those tents a proper work out. The real walkers camp up there, obviously.’

Unsatisfied by the program on their group trek, Rich convinces Sophie that they ought to go in search of an encounter with ‘real’ nature. They are soon lost. With Sophie in charge, a terrifying storm shows them nature at its most powerful and indifferent to human life. Rich, affected by a septic sore on his foot, develops a high fever and begins to hallucinate — his disturbance and loss of reason ultimately finds embodiment in a ghostly vision of that emblem of lost Tasmanian natural heritage, the thylacine.

Within the rich metaphoric framework of this text (where Tasmania’s Cradle Mountain embodies a number of freighted constructs; nature, history and wilderness) the emergence of the thylacine may be interpreted as the emergence of a sublimated memory or uncanny element, or as noted by Harold Bloom, echoing Freud and Walter Benjamin, ‘the return of the repressed by way of what Freud termed Negation’. It is the ‘spooky sublime’ — that is, an image that ruptures into consciousness as an emblem of that which has been silenced or forgotten.

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179 Kennedy, above note 3, 229.
181 Bloom, as above, 26.
Like the other trekkers, whom he derides, Rich has failed to truly examine his own arrogant assumptions about the precarious nature of human–nature interactions. At the heart of his bravado is a belief that it is possible to have an unmediated relationship with ‘true’ nature; and, paradoxically, that nature will co-operate with his desire to be inside nature but not adversely affected by it. Once lost, Rich and Sophie find themselves at the mercy of the very landscape to which he wanted privileged access. Wild nature is not sympathetic to human goals for self-development, he learns. It is a cruel and ironic lesson.

Rich’s exploratory actions make a (somewhat ironic) textual reference to the journey of Patrick White’s eponymous main character in the Australian twentieth century novel, *Voss*. Kennedy’s text echoes the Gothic motifs in *Voss* — the difficult, evasive and perilous aspects of the Tasmanian landscape are emphasised and Gothic imagery (foraging black crows, dead trees) reminds the reader of the text’s connection to the Gothic landscape literature of Australia’s colonial past. Unlike Voss, Rich and his daughter do not perish. After their rescue, Cate Kennedy’s characters are required to examine the silences and failures in their relationships.

The exploratory spirit of Voss may be felt in the inexorable motion that propels these modern characters south, from their comfortable lives, to Tasmania and along the rim of Cradle Mountain and then, finally, off the walking trail. Patrick White’s *Voss* critiques the narratives of exploration and heroism that drove men — such as Leichhardt, Burke and Wills — to their deaths. In *The World Beneath*, the characters move forward in search of a ‘wilderness’ with a hint of this explorer’s hunger. Perhaps Kennedy’s text alerts readers to a human drive that is inexplicable yet

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182 White, above note 65.
identifiable: people venture because they simply must; some implacable drive compels them forward. The urge overwhelms sensible thoughts. Just as Voss and the explorers of his time were compelled to discover what lay beyond the horizon, Kennedy’s characters (particularly Rich) are driven towards the discovery of an equally hidden or mythic goal: a ‘wilderness’, which he regards as an extant form of nature that has resisted human intervention or commodification. In *The World Beneath*, the reader becomes aware of Rich’s stupidity, his arrogance and his failure to appreciate the resounding irony of his goal.

Cate Kennedy’s daring use of both obvious symbolic references (such as the connotative title, *The World Beneath*) and subtle, carefully crafted resonances suggests an intentional playfulness. The reader is immediately aware of the text’s meaningful subject matter: the title informs the reader that this is a journey ‘below’, to hell. It also makes an echoing reference to the idea of the ‘Antipodes’ — *The World Beneath* the known world (Europe) in which everything is upside down, distorted and unexpected.

A double irony is at play here: the story begins in fictional Ayresville, and moves south to Cradle Mountain in Tasmania. The characters’ journeys to a ‘world beneath’, to the southernmost part of the Antipodes, is a journey to a brand of hell an Australian reader may instantly recognise. This is not just Australia, it is Van Diemen’s Land: a hell described in many colonial and early Australian texts and known for being Australia’s harshest penal colony; a scene of systematic settler genocide; and the site of the preventable extinction of the thylacine. The Tasmania of *The World Beneath* is viewed by all characters as a place unlike any other. In Ross Gibson’s words it is the
perfect place to ‘dramatise the limitations of the epistemology that the visitors [bring] to the place’.  

Tasmania contains some of Australia’s most significant ‘wildernesses’, and as such it retains a particular cultural significance. Its isolation marks it as a frontier, a place where one might encounter extremes. The landscape of the Cradle Mountain may induce a ‘sublime’ response; that is, it is ancient, vast and awe-inspiring. It is a place where landscape exists on a different scale, where time might be regarded as having a different pace. As Kennedy’s characters discover, in such a location, radical and violent character transformation can and will occur. At the Tasmanian ‘frontier’, on the pre-Cambrian glacier of Cradle Mountain at the edge of a vast, uninterrupted landscape, the risks to personal safety are real. Danger is only a few steps (in the wrong direction) away.

When Rich leads her off the path and falls ill, secretive teenager Sophie must take charge. Placing Sophie in the active role at the time of crisis has significance for the environmental discourse in the text. The environmental concerns within the text are voiced most convincingly through Sophie; yet she voices a sense of hopelessness and disempowerment. She reflects a number of times on the destroyed world that she and her peers will inherit:

She scanned the first page, her brain troubled, full of the images of the Amazon basin she’d coasted over using Google Earth that afternoon, mesmerized, at Jesse’s place. She couldn’t stop thinking about it. Floating like an angel, abseiling down to get a closer look at the dieback and soybean plantations and human roads crisscrossing it like unhealed scars on a body,

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183 Gibson, above note 62, 16.
soaring up again, thinking how small and vulnerable it really looked from above.184

And:

Terrible wrecked world, she thought. All of it sinking and melting and going under, the patches of green turning brown. Nothing good left, everything torn up and eaten and destroyed, everything dumped in the next generation’s lap.185

For Sophie, social change seems pointless and she ridicules her mother’s values:

She watched her mother consider this … with that dumb pious expression like when her group planned their agenda and spent half an hour deciding whether coffee and chocolate in themselves were oppressing Third World workers, or just certain brands. That eager, earnest light in their faces, as if they really believed they made the slightest bit of difference either way.186

The title of The World Beneath (and its ‘underworld’ connotation) also hints that a Persephone187 archetype may be at work here. Sophie is at the centre of its mythic framework as a tough twenty-first century Persephone goaded into visiting a hostile world — the textual ‘world beneath’, the desolate heart of the wilderness — by her father. She then becomes responsible for both her own survival and her father’s survival. Sophie is a vulnerable girl who masks any neediness behind a seemingly tough self-reliance. She wears only black, exercises to a self-punishing extent, listens to morbid, angry music, and takes a gloomy view of adults. Her Gothic style is reflected (and the Persephone theme hinted at yet more strongly) throughout the passages of text that describe their fateful walk:

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184 Kennedy, above note 3, 73.
185 Kennedy, above note 3, 102.
186 Kennedy, above note 3, 23.
His eye was caught by a black bird, a crow, alighting carelessly on a dead tree nearby. He turned the camera lens to it, but it spread its wings, eyeing him, and disappeared over the edge in a careless swoop.\footnote{Kennedy, above note 3, 119.}

The underworld imagery that surrounds Sophie is distinctive: the black clothes, the crow, the dead tree, the plunge over the edge. Indeed, as they travel further into ‘hell’, the landscape seems to acquire monstrous adaptations. Rich and Sophie discover birds that have determined how to unzip rucksacks and open plastic containers:

Their packs lay unzipped and the remains of ransacked biscuits and dried fruit lay scattered over the grass, torn from their ziplock bags and prised-open plastic containers.

‘It’s not people,’ said Sophie. ‘It’s those birds. Wait and see.’

She pointed to a few flapping black birds perched on a tree nearby and as he waited, watching, they wheeled down confidently, landing with a little jounce, and went back to tearing into their food supplies.\footnote{Kennedy, above note 3, 201.}

He concentrated on snapping the lid back on the container he was holding. He remembered buying that container, in the supermarket, before he even met her. Optimistically imagining them sharing trail mix out of it, in a ferny dell somewhere. A ferny dell! More like Jurassic fucking Park.\footnote{Kennedy, above note 3, 203.}

Mythic Persephone, from Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*\footnote{See online version at http://ovid.lib.virginia.edu/trans/Metamorph5.htm.} is often associated with renewal and the cycles of fertility across the seasons — a symbol rich with environmental significance. Persephone is regarded by some\footnote{See Hunt S. ‘Persephone Unbound: The Natural Environment, Human Well-Being and Gender, Explored in Selected Texts’. 1775-1900: PhD thesis http://researchspace.bathspa.ac.uk/1449/1/Stephen%20Hunt%20-%202002.pdf} as a figure of transgression, given that she repeatedly moves between the thresholds of the known world and the ‘world beneath’ (the underworld). Kennedy’s readers might wonder if Sophie’s journey must
end in more than a simple reunification with her family: in terms of the text’s symbolic patterning, her emergence from ‘the world beneath’ might be fully realised when she is able to cast off the cynicism that makes her so pessimistic about restoring the world’s environments. Sophie and her peers will inherit the human world, after all.

The notion of a world that has been somehow lost or has vanished is echoed in Rich’s thoughts, although Rich’s ‘lost world’ exists in hazy memory; ‘paradise’ is a nebulous landscape that belongs to the past. His memories have acquired a nostalgic taint, in which the beauty of the landscape is emphasised and his personal heroism is overstated. When the story opens, Sandy and Rich seem both caught in disappointing lives, which are made bearable by their constant reflection upon and reference to the Franklin River blockade. The landscape of the protest holds a deep significance for both Sandy and Rich; although the reader senses that they have exaggerated their roles in saving the wilderness and that they are attached to the memory not due to a love of the place, but because each feels the memory captures a time when they were performing at their best. In their views, the remembered Franklin River is the landscape that frames them ideally; the landscape is airbrushed by nostalgia and vanity.

The strategy of closely associating notions of nature–landscape with memory, constructs of self and history is an important one, readily opening Kennedy’s text to multiple interpretations. This blurring of boundaries — between place, history and
memory — recalls Hayden White on Paul Ricoeur,\(^{193}\) examining the ’history-memory connection’, who remarks on Ricoeur’s insistence on memory as historical text:

> It is memory, after all, that compels us to confront the enigma of how what is past can perdure into the present and, no matter how we might wish it, that refuses to go away on command but remains present to consciousness.\(^{194}\)

Rich’s clear attachment to a memorised history linked to place can be interpreted as a negation of a notion of the ’fixity of the past’\(^{195}\) — and, by extension, the fixity of landscapes that exist as sites of memory.

The reader is introduced to Rich and Sandy’s Franklin Dam heroics through Sophie, who regards the story with teenage disdain and ranks it alongside other ‘comforting fictions’ (to use David Tacey’s term):\(^{196}\)

> Other kids had The Three Bears every night of their childhoods; she had the Franklin River Blockade.

> ’What people couldn’t believe,’ Sandy would continue, as if the thought was just occurring to her for the first time, ’was that we were prepared to put ourselves on the line for a place. For a river.’\(^{197}\)

Sophie detects a phony note in her mother’s sighing reflection; Sophie knows the story has outgrown real experience and assumed the proportions of myth.

Rich’s real experiences of being ’close to nature’ during their walking trip are at first characterised by his rather distanced ambivalence and critique of the other walkers and finally coloured by his terror and mania. It is indicative of his lack of self-


\(^{194}\) White H, as above.

\(^{195}\) White H, above note 193, 312.


\(^{197}\) Kennedy, above note 3, 11.
awareness that he leads Sophie into danger in order to regain something of the wild nature he associates with his glorified past. It becomes clear, as they walk, that his lost paradise is nothing more than a shabby collection of hopes and aspirations — traces of his identity, notions that contribute to his ideas of himself — which have been misplaced or become tarnished over time:

Somehow eight years had fallen through the cracks since then, nearly a decade he’d lost without really paying attention.198

He recalls a time when his choices were more spontaneous and his image less contrived, when the world was still surprising; when, perhaps, he felt closer to his own apparently ‘authentic’ nature:

Even before Rich has his metanoic encounter with the wilderness, the reader senses that for Rich, the constructed narratives of self-hood are already becoming unreliable:

Because just last year, it felt like, he was in his early twenties and knew all the chords to ‘Moondance’ and the world was undisputedly, gloriously, his oyster.199

Rich’s life is represented as devoid of ties or responsibilities but, at the same time, markedly empty of real pleasure or achievement. The reader is appraised that his love of nature is no more than a contrivance; a made-up spiritual centre that masks a central emptiness. Rich is a creature of surfaces, sensations. He has a canny eye for the artifice of things. He bitterly recounts the gullible tourists, opportunistic villagers and photogenic ‘sad-eyed Afghani kids’ he met travelling, before:

… the backpackers and the gap year Eurotourists and this whole generation of restless rich kids started colonizing every unexplored inch of the planet until it felt like one big overrun strip mall.200

198 Kennedy, above note 3, 45.
199 Kennedy, above note 3, 46.
The comments of his fellow hikers begin to jar; in particular, he is irritated by their expectations. They want spectacular, picturesque, awesome nature:

‘That’s it?’ The American woman said doubtfully, looking bemused. ‘That’s the tree we’ve been hearing so much about?’

A knot of people stood around the sparse little stand of myrtle beech, with its small pleated leaves turning yellow. Rich had heard that particular tone of voice so many times on so many trips; its polite disappointment, condescendingly concealed but not quite enough. …

There was a short pause as they gazed at the tree, wondering if it was worth a photo. Wondering, he thought, if there was a better thicket up ahead, something more in keeping with their expectations.201

This notion of the inadequacy of the ‘real’ is recurrent in Kennedy’s text: here Kennedy connotes Baudrillard on the nature of simulation, whereby the contest of the ‘real’ versus the ‘image’ becomes subsumed by the simulacrum of the real which, in recognising its artifice:

   envelops the whole edifice of representation itself as a simulacrum.202

Rich recognises the inability of ‘real’ nature here to live up to the image of itself; and, in doing so, exposes the activity of gazing upon nature as an ironic one which always causes the gazer to reflect upon the activity of gazing — and it is innately dissatisfying.

Rich also reflects on the process by which the walkers on his trip choose to ‘soften’ or filter their engagement with nature:

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200 Kennedy, above note 3, 49.
201 Kennedy, above note 3, 181.
Staff, Rich thought disgustedly. That’s what they want — staff on hand to ensure their every need is met, pull them out of any potential scrape as they play at roughing it, having their wilderness experience, floodlights and gravel paths guiding the way to each tent. Pandas washed and brushed clean. Trees that guaranteed to impress even the most jaded Bostonian. Sherpas bringing you a morning latte on the slopes of Everest.

He enjoys confronting the ‘jaded Bostonian’ and the other hikers with their own calumny, and puts his nature-lover’s vocabulary to use:

‘I think it’s magnificent,’ he said in a low voice to the Americans, moving behind them. ‘It demands we experience the landscape in its own terms, not with our own competitive mine’s-bigger Western mindset. It’s a Zen thing.’

Yet while Rich once might have meant the responses he gives, now they have a hollow and inauthentic ring. If anything, he succumbs hardest and fastest to the competitive ‘Western mindset’ by trying to rough it the roughest; by going off the path and looking for the ‘real’ nature.

This is an example of Rich’s ironic path in the text — whereby he is able to critique the position of the other hikers’ views of nature; yet he is never truly able to truly overcome his own susceptibility to those views. In *The World Beneath*, it is pride (or hubris, that tragic flaw) that leads Rich to stray from the walking track and into the bush, which forces their encounter with a hellish landscape. In Oedipal dramatic terms, hubris is associated with poor vision, shortsightedness and delusion. Hubris is defined in its common usage by merriam-webster.com as exaggerated pride or self-confidence. In Sophocles’ play *Oedipus Rex*, the quality of hubris also expresses Oedipus’ defiance and rejection of the fates decided for him by the gods. Oedipus gouges out...
is a pleasing consonance in themes here: Rich is a photographer, a man who has spent a lifetime pursuing the perfect image. Throughout the trek, he parcels the landscape into picturesque scenes, capturing each vision and distilling it on film. He seeks out ways of producing a pictorial representation of the ineffable. Rich recalls with bitter regret the many perfect visions that escaped his photographic immortalisation:

He looked up and out. Of course it was an unbelievable view: they were 1223 metres above sea level on a pre-Cambrian glacier; what did you expect? But he still took the lens cap off his camera and aimed. Dove Lake far below looked dark as a pool of ink. What was it with humans and their insatiable desire to get up high to look at bodies of water underneath them? His eye was caught by a black bird, a crow, alighting carelessly on a dead tree nearby. He turned the camera lens to it, but it spread its wings, eyeing him, and disappeared over the edge in a careless swoop.208

He marvels at the photographs taken by Dombrovskis, a photographer from the pre-digital age, whose photographs had become the accepted, authoritative iconography of Tasmania. He describes Dombrovskis’ photographs as having produced some extraordinary, supernatural clarity and depth. Again, the question arises: is nature itself — unmanipulated, unenhanced — adequate? Does it live up to expectation?

The depth of field he wanted, you just couldn’t get it with these new digital cameras, he was convinced. They were for happy snappers, really. Dombrovskis had used his huge-format camera, lugging it with his tripod through days of wilderness, and you could tell. Those frosty leaves, the focus going on forever, those beads of dew and granules of sand and ice. He’d spent many hours studying those photos. Well, you couldn’t help it — they got jammed into your field of vision every direction you looked — every souvenir

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208 Kennedy, above note 3, 119.
shop and wilderness shop and bookshop and market stall had them reproduced on racks in all their glory. Nobody else came close.  

This notion that images of nature can determine expectations of ‘truth’ in nature also connotes Baudrillard on simulation, where:

Illusion is no longer possible, because the real is no longer possible.  

For Rich, ‘real’ nature is always just out of reach — it is perfect, unattainable yet the image of it is clear in his mind and he feels it to be tantalisingly close. Baudrillard also notes this capacity for the filmic image (particularly cinema) to engage with lived experience in a form of co-creation:

The cinema and the imaginary (the novelistic, the mythical, unreality, including the delirious use of its own technique) used to have a lively, dialectical, full, dramatic relation. The relation that is being formed today between the cinema and the real is an inverse, negative relation: it results from the loss of specificity of one and of the other.

Rich describes a terrible moment of loss — when an ineffable vision of paradise literally slipped through his fingers; when ‘No other picture he’d ever taken mattered compared to the one he’d just lost’:

His own Rock Island Bend, the one that could have made the cover of Nature, his own little precious, unrepeatable negative that would make his name. And only he had seen it. Only him. The proof of his talent, his vision, and the loss of it something he’d have to carry forever, his own private scarred little burden.
Here, Rich’s true sense of the value of nature is exposed: he hopes to exploit the landscape to elevate his own status and attain, at last, some much-prized recognition. His nature-affinity has been falsified: nature is reducible to an image.

Photography tropes appear throughout Kennedy’s the text; this enables an exploration of notions of the real versus the image; of the characters’ desire to recognise the real within a clutter of images; and of the ironic failure of experience when compared against expectation, where expectation is created through enhanced, imaginary images of ‘reality’. For example, Sophie recalls a photograph of her father — the closest thing she’s had of a ‘real’ image of him for many years — and compares him to it:

Now she watched him, that stranger. That guy. Her Polaroid father. A ponytail, same as in the photo. A camera around his neck, and his hands resting on it, ready, same as then. Every other detail was revealed now as stuff she’d painstakingly invented.213

Sandy, Sophie’s mother, also has this dream about photography:

She was trying to get her passport photos taken, but somehow at the moment the flash went off she’d slip awkwardly on her seat, or jump in surprise … There she was, slipping out of the frame, her eyes widened like a lunatic. And there, a blur of head you could count on to move just at the wrong moment. … Waving that sheet and peeling back the protective layer, to find that she wasn’t even there. She’d disappeared entirely.214

Kennedy’s use of this photography motif becomes a meditation on notions of the image versus the ‘real’. Authenticity seems to be highly prized by all characters but there is no clear sense that they can define what that is, or achieve it in their relationships.

213 Kennedy, above note 3, 192.
214 Kennedy, above note 3, 198.
While it is through the voice of Sophie that the author explores the environmental issues in the text, it is through Rich that the reader encounters the notion of ‘landscape’ as a version of nature resulting from culturally produced ideas (recalling the theoretical discussions put forward by Cronon, Byerly and Langton concerning nature and wildnerness).\textsuperscript{215}

Similarly, it is through Rich that we see the way the ‘sublime’ Tasmanian wilderness is used to force violent transformation; and the transformation he experiences affects him on the corporeal, epistemological and enunciative levels (recalling, here, the quasi-Kantian notion of the sublime\textsuperscript{216} used in the analysis; and in particular, Bloom’s notion of the emergence of the uncanny).\textsuperscript{217} When Rich’s fever deepens, he is tormented by visions of a thylacine. In the quote below, the influence of Voss may be read in the descriptions of Rich’s breakdown:

His mind lay disordered and agape for a few seconds, like something ransacked.

The animal ran past where they sat, twisting itself back again as it encountered the rock face, facing them again, almost cowering. He saw the tail, its curve and weight, and it was real, his hand plunged reflexively for his camera …

Stripes. He saw the stripes, patterned along that hunched muscular spine like a branching fern, and knew even as his thumb felt for and found the flash switch that there would be no more misfootings into cruel empty space; he had the camera in both hands, reflexes humming like a sharp note, and nothing was going to be the same now.\textsuperscript{218}

\textsuperscript{216} Kant, above note 127.
\textsuperscript{217} Bloom, above note 180.
\textsuperscript{218} Kennedy, above note 3, 283.
There is a neat philosophical symmetry here: what better vision for a photographer than a thylacine, that most elusive creature who continues to defy the most vehement cryptozoologist with a ready camera? Indeed, the thylacine resonates with the deepest of the text’s environmental concerns: what more fitting hallucinatory ghost than the thylacine, for story that is so concerned with Australian notions of lost places, distorted myths and vanished nature?

From Sophie’s point of view, Rich’s breakdown is complete when he refuses to accept that his vision of the thylacine was just an hallucination. His ability to communicate becomes utterly reduced. Kennedy’s writing style in the quote above — the use of the fragments sentences and run-on lines — indicates the breakdown of clear thought experienced by Rich.

The World Beneath’s narrative arc towards denouement permits each of Kennedy’s characters to undertake a necessary and redemptive act, which results in an affirmation of closeness and family bonds. Sophie learns to let down her guard and rely on the adults she mistrusts; indeed, one hopes that she will also gather a sense of hope about the natural world she must safeguard. Rich faces up to his pride and arrogance and fear of true connection (and the responsibilities that entails). Sandy acts to save her daughter — but also saves Rich, in the process perhaps making room for forgiveness of past disappointments.

Sandy’s process of transformation is enacted dramatically via the device of the tree she has planted outside her house in Ayresville. It is a Tasmanian bluegum, planted when Sophie was born. After sixteen years, it has completely overgrown the space available and overhangs the house. Here, the metaphor of the overgrowing tree is capable of expressing what is unsaid: that Sandy’s narratives of selfhood, including
the mother-daughter narrative are ill-fitting; that the ‘Tasmania’ of Sandy’s past is a memory that has overgrown its allocated space and is preventing new growth:

God, she couldn’t believe how fast that tree had grown. It was like a triffid.

…

‘At least it’s a native.’

‘Not really,’ ‘[the plumber] said, and she stopped and looked blankly at him. ‘I mean,’ he went on, choosing his words, ‘it’s a native in the Tassie forests, sure, but it’s really an invasive species here, don’t you reckon?’219

Sandy, in thinking that she has chosen a native tree, has unknowingly imposed a very human, constructed understanding of ‘authentic’ nature — one appropriate to the specific forests of Tasmania but not for Ayresville. Sandy cuts the bluegum down, and in the final scene uses the sprouting stump to balance her camera, to photograph herself with Sophie — a further reference to the enduring power of the photographic image — newly reconciled, their transformation complete, framed momentarily in glorious afternoon sunshine:

She adjusted the camera’s timer to automatic and set it down on the stump, bent a couple of sprays of shooting blue gum regrowth out of the way of the lens. This was it, now. You pressed that button and then you ran to get into position; this was your one small ration of time, ready or not.

‘Come on mum,’ Sophie called. God, she was so composed!

Sandy pressed the button, and ran.220

Sandy marks their new era with a new and seminal image of Sophie and herself.

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219 Kennedy, above note 3, 53.
220 Kennedy, above note 3, 342.
The ‘landscape’ of Kate Grenville’s *The Secret River* is, perhaps, more complex. One might argue that *The World Beneath* examines a Voss-like journey to hell and *Dirt Music* portrays a search for a sheltering paradise on earth; yet *The Secret River* takes the reader to a tormented liminal landscape, a sort of purgatory, where actions cannot be atoned for and sins may never be erased. Sal and Will Thornhill meet both opportunities and threats in their exploration of the Hawkesbury. To exploit the opportunities means to confront the threats — in this case, it means to commit acts of violence that stain the conscience.

*The Secret River* is a third person intimate narrative following central character William Thornhill. The meso-physical journey in Grenville’s text takes place in the Upper Hawkesbury River region of NSW, north of Sydney which, in the early 1800s, is virtually untouched by white settlers but clearly inhabited by Aboriginal people, whose rights to the land are largely ignored by the settlers who have made it their home.

*The Secret River* begins in London, with the crime that causes young William Thornhill to be sentenced to deportation. After their arrival in Australia, the Thornhills begin their exploration and subsequent violent occupation of the disputed piece of land in the upper Hawkesbury. William Thornhill is deeply stirred by the natural beauty of the place and the opportunities it represents, and becomes fixated on owning a particular part of it:

> A kangaroo had stood chest high in the grass and watched him, and he had discovered a hunger in himself he had never known before.

> The place was a dream that might shrivel if put into words.221

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221 Grenville, above note 5, 112.
At this point, the landscape becomes mapped according to his longing to own and keep land (in particular, the sandy promontory which captures his heart) in keeping with his expanding ambitions as an aspirant ticket-of-leaver. Ignoring both local advice and evidence, Thornhill settles land that is already claimed and cultivated by the local Aboriginal people.

William Thornhill’s expectations regarding the landscape are quite clear: he seeks to exploit the apparently empty land in order to initiate a change in his family’s status. The unsettled land is a place of opportunities, where today’s paupers might be tomorrow’s kings. The natural landscape is perceived by Thornhill and his peers as an inexhaustible commodity. This anthropocentric view of nature, as identified by Cronon and others222 rings true as a representation of the beliefs of Thornhill’s era: here, nature is as a consumable commodity, whose status is perpetual abundance. In a contemporary context, nature representation that emphasises nature’s plenitude and bounty links to ‘Edenic’ narratives. Within a context of contemporary notions of eco-Eden, this fecund, imaginary nature also contains the ‘seeds’ for regrowth, restoration and a ‘putting to rights’ of all human-caused environmental degradation.223

For Thornhill, the particular piece of land that he desires assumes the proportions of something much more significant that just dirt — something more-than-material.224 It is the key to a better future, it is his way out of poverty and the medium by which he and his family will transform their convict sentence into an opportunity for self-improvement:

222 See Cronon, above note 9; supporting the ideas articulated by Glotfelty (above note 8) and Byerly (above note 103).
223 Consider Slater C ‘Amazonia as Edenic Narrative’ in Cronon, above note 9, 116.
224 Matthews above note 171.
He let himself imagine it: standing on the crest of that slope, looking down over his own place. Thornhill's Point. It was a piercing hunger in his guts: to own it. To say mine, in a way he had never been able to say mine of anything at all.\footnote{Grenville, above note 5, 106.}

He and Sal, his wife, are eager to better themselves in the shifting frontier world where it becomes clear that upward social mobility is possible. They quickly recognise that a person can leave the past behind in a frontier settlement: he or she can be remade.

Thornhill’s chosen piece of land is cultivated by the local Aboriginal people for growing daisy yams. The local Aboriginal people object to the Thornhill’s settlement initially. But for a time, the two groups find a way of living in nervous co-existence. Sometime later, Will discovers carvings on the rockface along the ridge behind his place, a fish and a boat. He recognises the boat as his own. He knows then that the land is marked and claimed, and always was.

Thornhill tells no-one what he has found as to do so would confirm what others have suggested and he has doggedly ignored: first, that the land was ‘owned’ and occupied; second, that he can never truly ’own’ it in any significant or meaningful way. In observing but telling no-one, he crosses from unknowing, to knowing, to concealing. The action of concealment makes him a liar; and so his moral unraveling begins. The local Aboriginal people had seen and recorded his arrival long before he knew of their existence. If anything, it is he whom, having had his earliest presence recorded in the landscape, is marked and owned.
Here Grenville has represented an act of negation that has, according to Marcia Langton been erased from history by the ‘amnesia’\footnote{Langton, above note 113.} upon which the myth of wilderness is founded: this is the myth that insist that human traces (both past and present) are absent from true wilderness, in order for it to be regarded as ‘pristine’. Indeed, as Grenville’s text shows, the passive contemporary act of amnesia can be traced to a very decisive historical act — one which negates prior Aboriginal occupation. Thornhill’s act dramatises the lie of \textit{terra nullius}.

His seizure and settlement of the place is built on the lie of emptiness — the same lie, of \textit{terra nullius}, that lay at the heart of pre-\textit{Mabo}\footnote{In \textit{Mabo v Queensland (No 2)} (commonly known as \textit{Mabo}) the High Court of Australia rejected the doctrine of \textit{terra nullius} and recognised native title in Australia. In rejecting \textit{terra nullius}, the High Court acknowledged that Aboriginal people in Australia had an extant system of traditional laws and customs that established custodianship, connection to or occupation of the land at the time of white settlement.} white Australian governance. \textit{Mabo v Queensland (No 2)} 1992 extinguished the notion of terra nullius and established that Aboriginal occupation of the Australian continent, prior to the arrival of white settlers, was based on complex human–land relationships. \textit{Mabo} also established a pathway for Aboriginal Australians to assert this relationship through a common law right of native title. In the years that followed, however, conservative Australian politicians, historians and educators fought back against a perceived 'black armband' view of history.\footnote{Term coined by historian Geoffrey Blainey.} The Australian Parliamentary Library notes:

\begin{quote}
The expression 'black armband view of history' has been used to describe a brand of Australian history which its critics argue 'represents a swing of the pendulum from a position that had been too favourable, too self-congratulatory', to an opposite extreme that is even more unreal and decidedly
\end{quote}
jaundiced. Not only, it is said, does the black armband view belittle past achievements, it also encourages a 'guilt industry'\[.\]229

Grenville based the text on the story of her ancestor, Solomon Wiseman (who settled Wiseman’s Ferry).230 This retelling has the effect of giving the reader an opportunity to examine ‘real’ actions within an ‘invented’ context of personal motivation, desire, ignorance and fear as embodied in her characters. In ‘Unsettling the Settler’231 Kate Grenville discusses her inspiration for writing The Secret River. She wonders if he was complicit in the massacre of local indigenous people. Was he a gun-carrying type? She described the research as ‘uplocation’:

For a start, I realised that I knew much more about the frontier and its violence than I’d ever let myself realise that I knew. The more research I did, the more I realised that, although I may not have known the details, I had to recognise that I’d always known the broad outline of the story. A simple one, really — we had come here and displaced the people who were already living here. 232

But she also identified the marked nature of the Australian bush:

Some of the dirty work had been done by smallpox and measles but we all knew there’d been violence as well. Look at any map of Australia, full of places called things like ‘Niggers’ Leap’ and ‘Waterloo Creek’.233

The question of where Grenville’s text is situated in historical debate — not just in terms of its 'black armband' views but also concerning who has the 'right' to tell the

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\[230\] In ‘Unsettling the Settler’ Grenville discusses her fears about what she will discover about Solomon Wiseman, her relative who forms the basis for William Thornhill. This was a lecture given as part of the Australian Psychoanalytic Society’s annual conference, 22nd July 2006, on the theme ‘Unsettling the Settler: History, Culture, Race and the Australian Self’. It was published in their online journal, Psychoanalysis Downunder. Available at kategrenville.com.

\[231\] Grenville above note 230.

\[232\] Grenville above note 230.

\[233\] Grenville above note 230.
stories of history and how they should be told — is a contested one: Tom Griffiths recounts the responses to Grenville's novel and the ensuing debates:

'I haven't made it up', [Grenville] explained, 'I just put a novelist's flesh on the bones of the documents.' She wanted to talk about the past, and about the influence of the past in the present, and she 'wanted the book to be based at every point on whatever historical veracity I could find'. 'I've taken the skeleton out of the cupboard', Grenville declared.

Tom Griffith remarks that in the debate following Grenville's release of *The Secret River*, the text attracted methodological criticism from historians (perhaps unfairly):

'Fiction' as a genre was less scrutinised in this debate than was 'history'. Perhaps it was because Grenville's social realist style of fiction – with its earnest, psychologically transparent and empathetic relationship to the past – is rather close to the orientation of traditional history. But many novelists don't work with history in such a direct and transparent way, and they allow more room for the power of fiction itself to dramatise silences and uncertainty, to transform and morph reality, and to resist narrative closure (Falconer 2006).

Consider here Baudrillard again, who asserts that there can be no true distinction between history and fiction, when the 'mythical energy' of history is recognised as having a narrative origin:

History is a strong myth, perhaps, along with the unconscious, the last great myth. It is a myth that at once subtended the possibility of an "objective" enchainment of events and causes and the possibility of a narrative enchainment of discourse.  

235 Griffith above note 41.
236 Baudrillard, above note 202, 47.
237 Baudrillard, above note 202, 47.
History-as-it-is represented (for Baudrillard, this is particularly the case in cinematic or televised history) is ‘an invocation of resemblance, but at the same time the flagrant proof of the disappearance of objects in their very representation: hyperreal.’ For Baudrillard, the creation of history is an act of nostalgia for a lost ‘referential’ — that is, for a lost relationship to material events, when events are now historicised through representation.

Given its pluralist identity (as nostalgia; as fictionalised history; as historicised fiction; as hybrid) a reader of The Secret River may undertake a kind of multi-focus reading process: he or she may appreciate the unfolding narrative and simultaneously register the reverberations that the text makes within a broader postcolonial history discourse. In The Secret River the reader sees the natural location of Sydney Harbour and the Hawkesbury at a moment of transformation: from arcane, utterly ‘other’ and belonging to a shadowy race of ‘natives’, to mapped and owned by squatter-settler; from ‘natural’ bush to built, mediated, interpreted colonial ‘landscape’. The pattern of this story, of pressing forth into the mysterious, unknown landscape, is readily interpreted as a representation of journey to ‘within’ the psyche.

For this reader, it is clear that the land Thornhill chooses to settle is marked — it is cultivated or owned — from the moment Thornhill and his sons find the daisy yams planted by the local Aboriginal people. But Will’s determination to proceed prevents any acceptance of this. Instead, he makes an explicit choice to align himself with the flawed thinking of the day — with the brutes like Smasher Sullivan who kill Aboriginal people for sport. Charting a course through these choices is Grenville’s

\[238\] Baudrillard, above note 202, 45.
\[239\] Baudrillard, above note 202, 45.
way of ‘dramatising the limitations of the epistemology that the visitors brought to the place’. 240

Alison Ravenscroft, writing in Meanjin,241 notes that recent novels (including the other novels alongside which The Secret River forms a trilogy) that attempt to expand a view of the colonial settler experience risk being perceived as a form of historical remediation — whereby the text is interpreted as an excuse for white violence. She notes that:

despite non-Indigenous writers’ best efforts to revise the colonial story, they nevertheless risk revitalising it instead.242

Yet it is this reader’s view that the Thornhill’s and the other settlers’ occupation of the interior world of the upper Hawkesbury is portrayed unflinchingly. The horrors inflicted by the settlers are made evident, as are the attempts by more moderate characters to prevent these acts of violence. Grenville’s ensemble of characters display a spectrum of perceptions and behaviours towards the treatment of Aboriginal people: to begin with, the Thornhills’ treatment of Aboriginal people places them among the moderates. It is their eventual radicalisation and William Thornhill’s resort to violence that makes these characters’ journeys compelling.

To return to the central concerns of this dissertation — the representation of nature, place and landscape: the Thornhills consider leaving their Hawkesbury settlement but departing from the place he loves would be, for Will, a deep abandonment — he has

240 Gibson, above note 62, 16.
242 Ravenscroft as above.
subsumed the idea of that place into himself to the extent that he feels a father’s bodily attachment to it:

He could not turn his back on this place. How could he bear to go on passing in the boat and see some other man there? It would feel like giving up a child.\textsuperscript{243}

Yet his encounters with the local Aboriginal people trouble and perplex Will Thornhill daily. He gives voice to the assumed perceptions of his time about the Aboriginal people — the white settlers regard the Aboriginal people as lazy savages with no culture and no sense. Aboriginal people are regarded as a hazard of the land itself, a feature of the terrifying nature of the place:

… the same as the ants or the flies, a hazard of the place that had to be dealt with.\textsuperscript{244}

Langton comments on this practice of the Australian settler to describe the indigenous Australian as a figment of nature, whereby:

Aboriginal people were referred to as "vermin" and this was no mere justification for high head counts in the frontier wars. In newspapers, speeches in Parliaments and settlers' letters and diaries, there were calls for the annihilation of the Aboriginal race as quickly as possible to allow the advance of colonisation.

In Grenville's text, Aboriginal people appear to melt away and reappear in utter silence; their bodies mimic the shapes of the trees. They are uncannily quiet, a constant presence that conforms to the very contours of the land itself:

They wandered about, naked as worms, sheltering under an overhang of rock or a sheet of bark. Their dwellings were no more substantial than those of a butterfly resting on a leaf.

\textsuperscript{243} Grenville, above note 5, 283.
\textsuperscript{244} Grenville, above note 5, 94.
The most Thornhill ever saw was a silhouette stalking along a ridge, or bending over with a fishing spear poised to strike through the water.²⁴⁵

Speaking about the local Aboriginal people in this way renders them less than human; they are scarcely recognised by Thornhill and the other settlers as having individuality or particular consciousness. They are somehow corporeally indistinct. Langton notes that such representations of Aboriginality are ‘based on the tradition of "primitivism"’²⁴⁶ and permit the Aboriginal person to be regarded as non-human:

In manufacturing representations of "Nature" and "wilderness", the human mind constructs a relationship with the non-human. It is in this cultural paradox of "Nature" or "wilderness" signified as both human and non-human that certain kinds of cultural meaning are found.²⁴⁷

She notes:

this way of making Aboriginal people invisible, like the nocturnal fauna of the Australian eucalypt forests, [has been labeled] "zoomorphic".²⁴⁸

When Grenville's settlers in The Secret River are engaged in violent confrontation with the local Aboriginal people, the Aborigines’ spears ‘sail out of the forest’ as if a part of it:

There was not a single native, not so much as a dog. But dozens of spears had sailed out of the forest and trapped them, just the way they had hoped to trap the blacks.²⁴⁹

They are regarded as resistant to categorisation and as problematic as Australian nature itself: dangerous, unfamiliar, unexpected and difficult to predict. When a party is organised to attack the Aboriginal community — when ‘In its own stately time the

²⁴⁵ Grenville, above note 5, 95.
²⁴⁶ Langton, above note 113, 19.
²⁴⁷ Langton, above note 113, 19.
²⁴⁸ Langton, above note 113, 19.
²⁴⁹ Grenville, above note 5, 276.
instrument of the law swung against the blacks’ 250 — the Aboriginal people are to be herded like animals:

As one might drive sheep, the captain explained.251

Yet in Grenville's text, the instruments of the law of the empire are blunt with generality. The men chosen to attack the Aboriginal people are utterly ignorant of the landscape. Thornhill ventures to suggest that the maps drawn by Captain McCallum are no more than quaint illustrations:

The hillsides bristled with fins and plates of rock, the gullies were full of mangroves and reeds in mud thick enough to swallow a man. Every tangled vine, sprawling root and whip-like bush would resist a single human, let alone a detachment, passing through.252

Here, the reader glimpses Will’s potential to be an agent for positive change; he recognises the true complexity of the land and the vain stupidity of the enforcers of the law. Yet he fails to act and through his inertia fails to be that agent of change. He thus commits himself to the purgatorial cycle of continual self-examination, in which his personal choices are always viewed with complex regret.

The closing scene of the novel describes Thornhill surveying his piece of land along the upper Hawkesbury River. He has joined the battle against the so-called ‘blacks’; he has fought them and won. But his feelings about it are deeply ambivalent. ‘Too late, too late,’ Thornhill remarks to himself.253 The time has passed for making amends or even seeing how things might have been done differently. His sense of loss leaves him overwhelmed. He is cut through with doubt. So he stands with his

250 Grenville, above note 5, 272.
251 Grenville, above note 5, 273.
252 Grenville, above note 5, 274; Note here the similarity to the Rosa Praed quote previously.
253 Grenville, above note 5, 349.
telescope scanning the bush, hoping for a glimpse — some evidence — of the return of the local Aboriginal people, the same people he has played his part in destroying:

Sometimes he thought he saw a man there, looking down from the clifftop. He would get to his feet and go eagerly to the edge of the verandah, would lean out squinting to see the man among so many confusing verticals.

… Finally he had to recognize that it was no human, just another tree, the size and shape of a man.

Each time, it was a new emptiness.\(^{254}\)

Thornhill lacks words to articulate his sense of loss:

This bench here, where could overlook all his wealth and take his ease, should have been the reward.

He could not understand why it did not feel like a triumph.\(^{255}\)

Thornhill’s exploration of the Hawkesbury River region gives him the opportunity to receive a penetrating insight into himself; consider here Cronon, who states that:

By seeing otherness in that which is most unfamiliar, we can learn to see it too in that which first seemed ordinary.\(^{256}\)

Here Thornhill turns the questioning gaze upon himself and recognises alterity within: he glimpses a different self, a new and violent stranger. His transformation is a violent one, although the corporeal violence is inflicted on others. He is no longer the person he thought he was; by committing acts of violence he has damaged the relationship he holds most dear, the relationship between him and his wife Sal.

This notion that Thornhill has glimpsed ‘a stranger within’ is carried through in his reflections on his relationship with his wife, Sal. In the final scene, Will reflects that

\(^{254}\) Grenville, above note 5, 348.
\(^{255}\) Grenville, above note 5, 349.
\(^{256}\) Cronon, above note 9, 88.
he has changed and that he and Sal have become strangers to themselves and each other.

He saw that she did not recognise him. Some violent man was pulling at her, the stranger within the heart of her husband.257

There is a failure of language in his relationship with Sally:

He wished that she would speak, but she said nothing. Not then and not later. He would have welcomed an accusation. If she had accused, he could have replied. He had his answers ready. But she never did.258

In this quote, the reader can see that an ultimate breakdown has occurred: the breakdown of language. Over time, silences have appeared in the relationship between husband and wife — a relationship that is conveyed from the start of the story as loving, honest and supportive. By keeping small secrets from Sal, William Thornhill hides his shame from her but it costs him her closeness and respect.

The reader understands that Will’s success has cost him dearly. For Will Thornhill, the land carries memories of his own failure. It is his punishment that he must look at it every day and wonder what he has done. One might propose that Grenville intends the silences and the uncertain regrets that make William Thornhill so uncomfortable stand as an analogy for the gaps and silences in the pages of settlement history. Indeed, a post-colonial reading of this settler text might make the claim that Thornhill’s ultimate self-examination, in the novel’s final scene, provides an analogy for the examination that takes place in Australian culture. Thornhill’s nagging sense of regret captures the indistinct yet persistent feelings of shame about the past that hover in the minds of many Australians.

257 Grenville, above note 5, 338.
258 Grenville, above note 5, 338.
The alteration of William Thornhill’s values becomes clear as his narrative unfolds. Yet the overwhelming desire and terrible fear which contextualise his choices are also clearly portrayed. With this in mind, the author’s claim to have based the story in fact causes a potential diversion for the reader. More questions then emerge: has Grenville provided an apology or rationale for white settler actions by giving them a sympathetic fictional context? Can fiction effectively examine historical fact?

As he refuses to yield his chosen portion of land, darker aspects of Will Thornhill’s character emerge; a reader learns he is prepared to kill and to lie to satisfy his own desires. Read in this way, Kate Grenville’s novel *The Secret River* contributes in a unique way to the voices raised against inculcated (white) history; it is simultaneously invention, history, revision, apology, and personal excoriation. It is the telling of a secret and the revelation of hidden truth, the disclosure of occult subjects. The landscape of the novel motivates its drama; that is, questions about the land itself — who has rights to it, who belongs to it and to whom it belongs, and who understands it — provide the key points of conflict. By showing one character’s story of desire, conflict, decision-making and change, she demonstrates the wider process by which fear and ignorance can cause the erosion of moral and ethical refinement, and where people’s actions may become brute and base. She also shows the reader how regrettable actions become normalised by the politics of the day and the resulting reports and fictions are sanitised.

In examining the impact of *The Secret River* at a time when the discipline of history was under attack from conservative factions, Tom Griffith notes:

Grenville’s ‘oblique voice of fiction’ offered a new direction precisely because it was oblique. It was not a work of logic and argument, and it was never
going to attract the counting-the-dead conservative critique because it didn’t
deal in contextual, documented truth.

He also notes that Grace Karskens saw Grenvilles’ text as achieving the quality of a
parable.259 If The Secret River is bush lore retold for a postcolonial context, the
politically sensitised reader might ‘read’ the landscape with one’s mind in part upon
the prima facie story, in which acquisition of land and Aboriginal claims to land are
described according to the customs of the day, and in part upon the wider discourse
concerning settler treatments and perceptions of Australian nature, colonialism, land
ownership and Aboriginal dispossession. When the reader invites this wider discourse
into the reading experience, many questions emerge — all of which concern the
natural landscape. Who has rights to the land? Who owns it? What is land ownership?
What is the price of taking land that isn’t yours? What is the price of living with theft
and murder? What is missing when the indigenous keepers of the land are removed?

When these questions are taken into account, the bush ‘landscape’ of The Secret River
becomes, by virtue of its historical roots, an iconic account of white-black history in
this part of NSW; it becomes an imaginative record of Aboriginal traditional practices
(for instance, in its reference to the local Aboriginal people’s cultivation of the daisy
yams, the evidence of which Thornhill staunchly ignores); and it becomes, one might
argue, an apology for the actions of the white settler, personified in this text by
William Thornhill, whose actions become comprehensible by the fact that he is the
novel’s focal character and we hear his intimate thoughts. Lastly, it becomes
synecdoche. The story of William Thornhill may be deemed a specimen. An analysis
of Thornhill’s actions becomes an analysis of NSW settler history. To quote Tom
Griffiths quoting Karskens:

259 Griffiths, above note 41.
‘This is a story about all settlers, and settler psyche, in all places, throughout the colonial period’. 260

Tim Winton’s Dirt Music is also concerned with the relationship between landscape and history; only in this case, the histories are deeply personal and place-memory is a language by which to establish and affirm interpersonal connections. As in Cate Kennedy’s The World Beneath, the emotional force of landscapes is discussed openly in Dirt Music and these conversations and reflections reverberate in an overall textual thesis that places can move people deeply — they are the repository of memory, a catalyst for change, a means by which people can become joined and overcome isolation.

Dirt Music is a third person narrative, concerning lovers Georgie Jutland and Luther Fox. In Dirt Music, Georgie Jutland is a stranger in the small fishing town of White Point and ill suited to the role she finds herself in, as the partner of Jim Buckridge, the town’s most respected fisherman and successful businessman. She spends her days inexpertly mothering Jim’s two hostile teenaged boys and, in her loneliness, drinking and wasting her nights on the internet, searching for diversions.

Logging on — what a laugh. They should have called it stepping off. 261

A natural ‘sailor, diver and angler’ 262 she nevertheless finds the seascape of White Point jarring.

Sentimental attachment to geography irritated her, Australians were riddled with it and West Australians worst of all, but there was no point in denying that the old predawn ritual was anything more than bog-standard

260 Griffiths, above note 41.
261 Winton, above note 4.
262 Winton, above note 4, 6.
homesickness, that what she was sniffing was that highball mix you imbibed every night of your riverside Perth childhood, the strange briny effervescence of the sea tide stirring in the Swan River, into its coves, across the estuarine flats.\textsuperscript{263}

For peripatetic Georgie, place seems irrelevant — that is, until a ‘sentimental attachment to geography’\textsuperscript{264} unites her, eventually, with the man she conducts an illicit affair with, Luther Fox. Consider here my earlier inclusion of the observation by Blair that in contemporary sensibility, place attains a significance above other referents, such as time:

\begin{quote}
-temporality as the organizing form of experience has been superseded by spatiality, the affective and social experience of space.\textsuperscript{265}
\end{quote}

Indeed, Georgie and Lu are portrayed as 'drifters': they seem unfixed in time and defy conventional cultural expectations about life 'moving forward'. Place, then, becomes an anchor.

Georgie is depicted swimming for pleasure in the ocean; her perceptions of nature seem to be at odds with those of the town’s community, where the residents make a living from exploiting the sea. They regard the ocean as a source of income and resulting power and prestige. In spite of her cynicism and her apparent rootlessness, Georgie Jutland becomes educated, through her relationship with Luther Fox, about the power of places. The text’s exploration of the influence and significance of natural landscapes is dramatised through their relationship. Luther Fox, fellow outsider, is bound to his home on the fringes of White Point by the bitter memories of the family members he has lost. Georgie’s connection to Luther is deeply felt. When his relationship with Georgie is discovered (and his illegal fishing is revealed), Luther

\begin{footnotes}
\item[263] Winton, above note 4, 6.
\item[264] Winton, above note 4, 6.
\item[265] Blair above note 17.
\end{footnotes}
Fox flees White Point and begins a journey through Western Australia that is part drift, part escape. He determines at last to go to the place Georgie once identified as having a special significance (an island in the Coronation Gulf) in the hope she will find him there.

Coronation Gulf is remote. Within the framework of textual symbols, the island in Coronation Gulf represents Georgie’s most outlying ‘self’. Lu, who is used being an ‘outsider’ flees there in an effort to make himself known to her. In doing so, he expresses his capacity to occupy and accept this alterity. The remote and harsh coastal landscape sustains him during his escape — for a time, at least. Here Luther Fox has his encounter with the sublime — in his half-starved, deranged state he seems to lose himself in the contemplation of the landscape. He is awed, overwhelmed and utterly at the mercy of nature.

In *Dirt Music* the characters move through changing natural environments in the West Australian landscape, responding to and reflecting upon the way these locations provoke moods and evoke responses. Landscape in *Dirt Music* unfolds into multiplicity: it is elegaic, sublime, sustaining and threatening. As poet and commentator Mark Tredinnick describes it, Winton’s descriptions of natural places are an example of the best kind of nature writing: vernacular, developed from personal and intimate knowledge.266 The third chapter of this dissertation interrogates the claims to authenticity underpinning ‘nature writing’ and argues that it is not possible to assert that one representation of nature can be regarded as truer than another: where all nature is a construct, it is conceptually problematic to assert the

266 See Tredinnick, above note 101, 43.
superiority of one construct above another.\textsuperscript{267} This dissertation also queries the usefulness of the role or position adopted by the ‘nature writer’ more generally (this is discussed in more depth in the concluding chapter). Nevertheless, Tredinnick’s terms (such as ‘vernacular’ and ‘personal’\textsuperscript{268}) are useful to describe the manner by which Winton’s landscapes become lively, distinctive and vivid evocations.

The \textit{Dirt Music} reader may engage with the textual force of these landscapes on a number of levels. The natural landscapes in Winton’s novel have an aesthetic effect: on the face of it, \textit{Dirt Music} is almost a travelogue, a simple and beautiful description of places. Yet it becomes possible to see that the use of landscape within the text breaks with literary tradition in important ways. The novel gains its rhythmic quality through its characters’ movements through the various natural locations of the story. Winton’s text brings ‘landscape’ from background to foreground, to be understood as a structural source of forward narrative motion and a powerful force for inciting action.

\textit{Dirt Music} evokes earlier Australian literary representations of ‘landscape’ as paradise. Ross Gibson notes in \textit{The Diminishing Paradise}\textsuperscript{269} the tendency in early colonial literature to apply utopian language to the descriptions of the Antipodes. The following excerpt, by Tasma, provides an example:

\begin{quote}
Only the mingled voices of wild birds and multitudinous insects were upraised in a blended monotony of subdued sounds. Not a morning to be devoted to toil. Rather, perchance, to a glimmering perception of a golden age, when sensation meant bliss more than pain, and to be was to enjoy.\textsuperscript{270}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{267} See discussion in Gibson, above note 62, 75; all concepts of nature are constructed.
\textsuperscript{268} See the discussion about Mark Tredinnick in Chapter 3.
\textsuperscript{270} Tasma, above note 65, 11.
A contemporary representation of the Australian landscape as a refuge or place of escape may be read as revealing a particular and multifaceted cultural longing. This extends the thinking of Slater on Edenic narrative as a powerful motivator in a time of ecological crisis.271 First, it suggests a longing for the anxieties about the harshness of the land to be soothed. Historically, Australian ‘Gothic’ literature has emphasised characters’ fears and uncertainties concerning the landscape. In the Gothic tradition, the Australian landscape is portrayed as threatening, formidable or indifferent to the suffering of its human inhabitants: Gothic traits appear in texts produced by writers of the early colonial era, such as Marcus Clarke, Barbara Baynton and Tasma — but Gothic motifs have been used well into the twentieth century, by writers such as Elizabeth Jolley and Patrick White. A post-colonial reading of a longing for unity and envelopment in the landscape might be read as a longing for unity, where all conflicts, including the conflicts of the past (between settler and indigenous people, settler and the exploited landscape) are harmonised. Luther Fox’s flight to the coastal wilderness may be read as a contemporary manifestation of that longing for envelopment, sustenance and harmonisation.

*Dirt Music* uses the Australian landscape as a focalising element through which to communicate its complex ideas about place and identity. For Georgie and Luther Fox, places become touchstones for communication; Luther Fox risks safety and sanity by travelling to the remote Coronation Gulf in the hope that Georgie will understand his behaviour and find him there. Land becomes the conductor of emotion, a conduit through which encrypted currents of human connection flow. This evokes the comments by Wisker and Plumwood on the necessity for contemporary writing to write the hidden stories of place; and to redeem nature though an examination of its

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271 Slater above note 223.
interactions with human agents.\textsuperscript{272} It also captures the characteristically Australian idea that when things fall apart you can ‘go bush’ — that is, head for the cover of the trees, hole up and wait the catastrophe out.

You lost, Lu?

Not yet.

Where you goin to?

Somewhere quiet.\textsuperscript{273}

Historically, outlaws and outsiders have chosen this route of escape from authority or danger, and, as a consequence, Australians have traditionally held a grudging respect for the skill required to be ‘a good bushman’.\textsuperscript{274}

While the other texts examined here also portray meso-physical journeys, \textit{Dirt Music} is unique in the sense that the journeys undertaken by the main characters cover vast distances — the northern half of the West Australian coast — and cross diverse landscapes. Georgie Jutland pursues an affair with Luther Fox. When news of their affair reaches Jim Buckridge, Georgie’s husband, Fox flees to escape the town’s opprobrium but also to distance himself from the earlier loss of his family in a catastrophic car accident. His journey on the road takes him inland and north until he reaches his destination: a special place Georgie mentioned, the one place she admitted she felt an unexplained connection to:

There was somewhere once, said Georgie, from pity as much as solidarity. A place I got stuck in. Up north.

\textsuperscript{272} Wisker, above note 38. Plumwood, above note 32.

\textsuperscript{273} Winton, above note 4, 308.

\textsuperscript{274} Consider the case of Malcolm Naden, who evaded police for seven years by living in the bush in the Northern Tablelands, north of Sydney. He was wanted for violent crimes, including suspected murder, and eked out a fugitive existence by living in a bush shelter and raiding local holiday homes. At the time of his capture, reportage remarked on his impressive survival skills and locals commented on the ‘gentlemanly’ way he cleaned up after himself when he broke into their houses.
Stuck how? he said.

In a boat. Aground, no less. There was an island and mangroves, boab trees, birds. I had this feeling of déjà vu about it, that it was a place I’d always known.275

Fox is searching for a refuge. He comments on this need to be alone in order to understand his place in the world and to find a meaningful framework for his own desperate loneliness and longing:

What he wants to do is slope off into the bush somewhere, do what he should have done more than a year ago instead of slinking around the edge of White Point like a feral dog. If you want to be left alone then clear out. Go somewhere clean. Some place with food and water so you’re not skulking at the margins to keep yourself alive. A place where you can stand alone, completely alone.276

Before Fox’s flight, Fox and Georgie reflect upon the landscape often, together and in solitary moments:

Georgie looked down at the shallow tea-coloured water. It was cool here. The southerly shivered the leaves and hoary bark.

I don’t understand what you’re doing, she said. Living like this. I mean, why stay on?

Things, places, they’re hard to shake off.

Georgie tried hard not to grimace. She had never understood the grip that places had over people. That sort of nostalgia made her impatient. It was awful seeing people beholden to their memories, staying on in houses or towns out of some perverted homage.277

And:

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275 Winton, above note 4, 102.
276 Winton, above note 4, 294.
277 Winton, above note 4, 98.
He tries to imagine the gibber plains and red dunes to the east, the impossible amplitude of the continent.\textsuperscript{278}

Fox and Georgie’s commentary about place builds the novel’s sense that place is significant for people on a number of levels — as a marker of history, as an aide-mémoir, as a repository for feelings of loss and as a haven or place of respite — and that the creation of safe or significant places answers a deep longing. Their commentary also reinforces the idea that landscape makes an impression on consciousness; or that consciousness creates that perception of nature and landscape.\textsuperscript{279}

Fox travels through the changeable landscape of the text and feels the changing moods of the places described. He responds to the natural world about him with a complex set of emotional responses; and his interactions are likewise infused with references to the landscape. Bess, a ‘grey nomad’ (a travelling pensioner) with terminal cancer who picks him up while he’s hitchhiking, comments:

Like the Middle Ages out there, says Bess, reviving. Look at them all. Makes you think of pilgrims, traders, refugees, crusaders, lunatics. You half expect Byzantium to appear around the next bend.\textsuperscript{280}

Travel attracts seekers, outcasts and frontier dwellers. The characters in \textit{Dirt Music} seem to be aware that the land can force changes; it can move, alienate and heal a person. For the most part, the people Fox meets on the road are looking for transformation or transcendence.

In \textit{Dirt Music}, as in \textit{The World Beneath}, there is an apparent echo of \textit{Voss} — at least in the sense that the landscape becomes the vehicle for transformation and rupture

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
\item[278] Winton, above note 4, 221.
\item[279] Refer to Cronon above note 9.
\item[280] Winton, above note 4, 252.
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
and, ultimately, plays a role in determining the character’s fate. Indeed, Fox’s journey and survival in the bush seems to attain a Voss-like aspect. At times, he appears to think and act like Voss. Consider this passage, when Fox is tormented by visions of Georgie, very much in the same manner that Voss is tormented by visions of Laura Trevelyan:

He loses his voice. A fever comes on him. For a few days he just lies in his swag, shivering. …

The air shimmers. Georgie Jutland breathes into his mouth. She tastes of food that he’s cooked for her. She lies against him, her hipbones creaking against his.  

But unlike Voss, whose path seems to drive towards death, Fox seeks immersion within the landscape and eventually, via the novel’s eventual denouement, reconnection to life and love. He seeks rescue and a refuge in which to wait out his expulsion from society, from sanity and from the world of known proportions and epistemological safety.

While Fox’s journey is by no means easy, he does manage to live, for a time, in a precarious harmony with nature; that is to say, he find that the version of nature is compatible with many of his urgent material needs: he finds a kind of Edenic paradise — where food is plentiful, where water quenches his thirst, where the land is unspoilt and beautiful.

Fox works on his rebuilt bough shelter and thatches it with spinifex and palm leaves. He weaves himself a pandanus brim to fortify the ruin of his cloth hat. He stockpiles pulpy mangrove wood along the edge and goes searching for birds’ eggs.

281 Winton, above note 4, 404.
282 Winton, above note 4, 375.
In this passage, he has achieved a kind of idyllic ‘Robinson Crusoe’ existence — a
where nature provides for his simple demands and simple pleasures. If Bloom’s
analysis of sublime terror is extrapolated here as an evocation of the ‘otherness’ in
nature,283 one might regard Fox’s fleeting experience of nature–harmony as a moment
of wholeness and a freedom from self-analysis and inner conflict. But violent and life-
threatening terrors are never far away:

In one pellucid tidepool he reaches down for a gorgeous blue-spotted stone but
he hesitates when its marking begin to move. Blue spots morph into yellow
dabs. The stone opens an eye and — fuck! — he recoils in shock. An octopus,
a blue-ringed octopus, no less. And his fingers only a handsan from touching
it. A bite would have killed him before he reached camp. Total nervous
shutdown. Gone.284

In an Australian context, one might argue that the urge to seek refuge in the landscape
is inextricably linked to the fear and paranoia that developed culturally over time
about the bush. It is an expression of suppressed desire — to love and be loved by an
entity that is regarded as fearsome and oppressive in the collective subconscious.
Compare here again the emergence of the thylacine in Rich's tormented dreams, read
via Bloom's interpretation of sublime as an iconic image of the suppressed
uncanny.285 The refuge-urge and the image of the thylacine are interpreted by this
reader as aligned symbols of a deeply-held wish for the violence of the past to be
forgotten and for human–nature relations to be harmonised.

Music, for Fox, enables (rather literally) his process of harmonisation with his
environment. Fox’s interior journey is accompanied by a kind of soundtrack: he

283 Bloom, above note 181.
284 Winton, above note 4, 246.
285 See Bloom, above note 180.
listens to Arvo Pärt and Shostakovich in the van with Bess and Horrie, he plays ‘The Pub with No Beer’ for Menzies; he uses a nylon string to make a ‘drone’ that he plays in the mad isolation of his island retreat. Winton explores the thundering, whispering, spine-chilling ‘music’ of the landscape of the north-west through Fox’s narrative. Through Fox, Winton describes the landscape in terms of its variable pitch and volume, and, accordingly, whether or not it is a suitable soundtrack to the drama of one’s life at any given moment. Horrie comments:

Russian bloke told me once. Said we all die. But you might as well die with music. Go out big. You see what I mean? She wants big music, Lu. And north is where you get it. The Kimberley, mate.286

Through references to music, Winton generates for the reader a multi-dimensional sensory appreciation of the effects of the landscape on individuals. He encourages the reader to see the varying senses of time, volume and pace that places can evoke — these musical ideas help to build the text’s descriptive power. Music supplies a metaphoric vocabulary with which to describe the ineffable aspects of the sublime landscape. Like the tree in Kennedy’s concluding scene in *The World Beneath*, the music in *Dirt Music* helps the unsaid to be said.

One might argue that Fox’s musicality places him somehow closer to nature: in possessing a musical temperament, Fox may be read as being apparently sensitive to emotional pitch and volume, capable of listening with attenuated sympathy to the world around him. Fox is drawn as a dialectical opposite to Jim Buckridge, who exploits the natural assets of the ocean and who, until a transformation towards the end of the novel, is represented as emotionally locked or unavailable.

286 Winton, above note 4, 248.
For the characters in *Dirt Music*, the landscape invokes curious and irrational feelings. Even Georgie, who is hard headed and skeptical, experiences these sensations:

> She couldn’t get the image of that monolithic island out of her head. … She thought about it now and then. It gave her a warm, uncertain feeling.287

The sublime qualities of the various lands that Fox passes through are conveyed to the reader through the allusory metaphor used in his musical commentary. That is, the language of music helps the characters describe the landscape to one another in terms that evoke the Kantian notion of sublimity.288 The sublime elements of the landscape — those that cannot be appreciated through rational means — provide for disorientation.

> [Horrie] decides his old mate Shostakovich is the go. Piano quintet! Some big music!

Fox slumps back in the luggage space behind them, sweltering. The music is jagged and pushy and he for one just doesn’t want to bloody hear it but the outbursts of strings and piano are as austere and unconsoling as the pindan plain out there with its spindly acacia and red soil.289

Fox, like Voss and like Rich in *The World Beneath*, begins to experience slippages in time which are no longer accounted for in minutes, hours or days — but in the ‘natural’ rhythm of the moon:

> Then moon waxes and wanes and takes a whole cycle of tides with it and for much of that time Fox feels disoriented.290

And once again, the language of music is key to his experiences of disorientation in the face of the sublime:

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287 Winton, above note 4, 209.
288 See Kant, above note 127.
289 Winton, above note 4, 249.
290 Winton, above note 4, 386.
One, one, one, one — you go up and down your note like a pup up and down a dune until you don’t feel your festering bites or your oozy eyes or sun-scoured neck, until you’re not one moment empty, nor one bit lost or one bit scared. You’re so far into ones you’re not one anything. You’re a resonating multiplication.291

The quote shows Fox’s threefold breakdown, his organic dissolution: self into environment. He is physically broken, psychologically disordered and his words have started to lose meaning.

Concepts of place or landscape as a vehicle for personal transformation are explored in my manuscript ‘The Snake in the Rock’. This novel explores meso-physical journeys that explore intergenerational trauma and flight from social pressure. The centrality of natural landscapes in this text is evidence of a ‘practice-led' element to my writing process — I have undertaken to explore notions of transformation in nature that are explicitly connected to my own experiences of travel and writing ‘in nature’ (I would not call this ‘nature writing’, for the reasons described in the third chapter of this dissertation).292

When placed in new landscapes (Australian urban and natural landscapes) the characters learn to see themselves differently. In ‘The Snake in the Rock’, new notions of selfhood allow the troubled characters to make a break with the past, and to understand that the old, conditioned ways of living that have held them back can be discarded.

291 Winton, above note 4, 388.
It was my intention to create the natural landscapes of ‘The Snake in the Rock’ as vivid, sensuous places. The characters respond to and reflect upon these places and, in doing so, vocalise the novel’s thematic concerns — that places affect people in unexpected ways; that places are not always what they seem (for example, Bondi and Paddington seem pleasant and middle class but these wealthy suburbs harbour both a homeless cave dweller and an ageing war criminal); and that sometimes, a revelatory encounter in a new place may trigger a helpful change — enabling a renegotiation of the limiting personal and interpersonal narratives of the past. The places in the text aim to provoke responses and cause the characters to question their life situations and the assumptions they have made about their relationships. In ‘The Snake in the Rock’, the inspiring landscape of Pittwater on Sydney’s northern beaches represents a place where new beginnings and personal happiness are possible.

By including Bondi, Pittwater and the Shoalhaven bushland, I have responded to a personal urge to write about places that affect me. I have included these reflections to be considered as a form of practice-led research, in which the place of personal experience within the creative research practice is recognised.293

Bondi, Pittwater and the Shoalhaven are all places that I have lived in or visited and been affected by. I acknowledge the affect that places have on me — in the excerpt below, from a piece of reflective non-fiction about my month-long retreat in Bundanon, on the banks of the Shoalhaven River, I noted that the place had affected the process of writing:

The first and the most obvious change was that the pace of my writing immediately slowed down. There was to be no zooming through scenes, no galloping through plot points in the way I’d envisaged. My characters started

293 McNamara, as above.
to behave strangely. They stretched, they looked around. They began to take their time over things. Their passages of reflection grew longer. They observed their surroundings with a new eye for detail. They were behaving as I was: putting on the brakes, taking it slow for a change. I began to see new depth emerging in my characters. Allowing them to stretch their minds a little meant that they were becoming more complex. They were able to be contradictory, faceted; they could move through different moods. 294

Natural places, then, are woven throughout the text of ‘The Snake in the Rock’ as influencers of mood and state of mind; as signifiers of new life choices and possibilities; as places of refuge; and as places where creativity flourishes. In particular, Felix’s father Jozef feels a sense of wonder at the Royal National Park, south of Sydney. This, coupled with his introduction to a new group of people whose social rules are looser than his own, induces in Jozef a freeing sensation. This prompts him to make a long overdue examination of the traumas in his past, while undertaking a journey through western NSW.

Like Cate Kennedy’s *The World Beneath*, Tim Winton’s *Dirt Music* and Kate Grenville’s *The Secret River*, ‘The Snake in the Rock’ depicts a number of characters who have left their homes and begun a journey to a new place. ‘The Snake in the Rock’ is a multi-focal narrative told in a realist style. Felix Fabin is an English divorcee and medical writer; Jozef is his father; Lena is an art historian who lives in Bondi; Yasir is a homeless asylum seeker who is sleeping rough in the caves below Lena’s flat; and Joyce is a retired ceramicist who lives on Scotland Island in Pittwater, north of Sydney. The story begins in London then moves to the beach suburbs of Sydney’s east and Pittwater.

294 Published on fionabritton.com.
‘The Snake in The Rock’ presents multiple meso-physical journeys and, in doing so, it argues strongly for the capacity of landscape and environment to induce liminal states, or disruptions to personal composure, that enable personal transformation. While a fulsome review of The Snake in the Rock as an artefact of autoethnography is beyond the scope of this dissertation,\textsuperscript{295} I can see that certain of my own desires and interests are also present in the actions and motivations of the characters. While characters encounter nature bounded by urban and suburban landscapes, nature is still impressive and significant. I have attempted to describe places with clarity and specificity and, in addition, I have tried to infuse the landscape with the capacity to invoke both love and confusion — making reference to the combination of both awed terror of and love of the bush that is, for this reader, a recognisable trope in representations of Australian landscape.

Chapter 3: the Meso-physical Narrative and the Recasting of Nature

This final chapter revisits the questions raised in the introduction to this dissertation. What does Bastian's requirement for writers to 'engage in the task of opening up an experience of nature as powerful and as possessing agency' mean? In the context of this review — and taking into account the preceding analyses — I here assert that 'opening up nature' means producing nature representation that is engaged in three broad strategies. First, in an Australian context, that means considering what is represented when writers represent nature: it means not idealising landscape and acknowledging the erasures that have become part of Australian landscape myth-making (considering, here, particularly Langton on the amnesiac view of Australian wildernesses). Second it means considering how nature operates on a textual level: it means exploring possibilities for nature representation where nature is portrayed as an active agent. Third, it means taking the more difficult step of opening textual representations of nature to a new recognition of the human interventions producing nature: that is, recognising the human origins of the nature and wilderness concepts and recognising the human traces, the technologies and interconnectivities which make humans part of nature, not separate from it. This third step allows for a conceptual break with a fundamental human/non-human duality.

This conclusion will ask: what is the role of natural landscapes in Cate Kennedy’s The World Beneath, Tim Winton’s Dirt Music, Kate Grenville’s The Secret River and ‘The Snake on the Rock’? Is there evidence of a convergence of ideas between these

296 Bastian, above note 37.
297 Langton, above note 113.
contemporary Australian meso-physical narratives and current nature-centric critical concerns? Do these fictional texts meet certain criteria for the change or advancement of nature–landscape representation argued for in contemporary critical theory, such as by Cronon, Byerly, Glotfelty, Plumwood and Bastian?298

First, however, before evaluating the success of these mesophysical texts in reimaging nature, it is useful to examine the writing of writers who claim to give nature a special attention and focus — nature writers. I have included an examination of Tredinnick’s introduction to *A Place on Earth* in this conclusion because the distinctions he makes between the types of nature portrayal and their apparent 'adequacy' go to the heart of the conundrum of how to talk about nature-as-represented.

Tredinnick’s introduction indicates that he believes a certain fidelity to the ‘truth’ of nature is a requirement of nature-centric representation. Yet while Cate Kennedy’s *The World Beneath*, Tim Winton’s *Dirt Music* and Kate Grenville’s *The Secret River* avoid cliché in their representations of nature, I would hesitate to suggest that they depict a ‘truer’ or ‘better’ natural landscape than any other, for the reasons set out below. Can any form of nature representation be regarded as ‘truer’ than another?

Here, again I refer to Cronon, noting:

> “nature” is a human idea, with a long and complicated cultural history which has led different human beings to conceive of the natural world in very different ways. 299

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298 See Introduction and Chapter 1.
299 Cronon, above note 9, 20.
Where it is understood that the concept of nature itself is ‘contested terrain’, the question of what is ‘good’ or ‘better’ nature writing becomes, in the view of this reader, unviable.

Tredinnick makes a distinction between ‘pastoral’ or idealised place writing and place writing that situates nature at the centre of its thematic concerns — and which articulates a finer, nuanced view of the land. The first is an urban writers’ fantasy, which is:

Escapist rather than realist and vernacular … It is unrooted in the soil of the places it evokes … [it] is an idyll of landscape made in the city.

The second type of writing about place and landscape, the type which Tredinnick prefers, is a deeply personal reflection:

… an act of love for a piece of ground.

This distinction is problematic; that is, it is unhelpful to draw a line between ‘pastoral’ writing, if ‘pastoral’ means writing that idealises landscape and nature, and writing which, Conversely, articulates a personal and contextual relationship to land and may therefore be regarded as more ‘real’.

To accept that a duality exists within writing about nature — where ‘true’ place writing is distinct from writing that conveys a fabricated, idealised view of nature — one must also accept that it is possible to create a representation of nature that asserts itself as the ‘truest’ or most authentic representation. This is theoretically difficult. How can such a truth be evaluated when, as Ross Gibson puts it, all our ideas about

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300 Cronon, above note 9, 51.
301 Tredinnick above note 101, 43.
302 Tredinnick above note 101, 43.
303 Tredinnick above note 101, 46.
nature are culturally produced? In addition, even if it were possible to assert what is real in nature, any writer who represents nature also generates a subjective view of his or her subject in the process of creating a representation of it. Consider here Baudrillard and his notion that the simulated real (the simulacrum) absorbs a notion of both the authentic and the imaginary, to assert its ascendence over both, as the hyperreal. The nature-writer, arguably, engages with nature that has become hyperreal and does so in a process of co-creation — reflecting nature that is both real, imaginary and better-than-real and, as Freya Matthew points out, is valued for more than its materiality, but for its significance as a commodity.

Tredinnick's distinction between the two types of writing about nature seems to draw its notion of the quality of the nature representation from a notion of the quality of the human–nature connection that produces it. This assertion may be read with the observations made by Lousely in mind — who, noting Steven Vogel, states that when the problem for environmentalists is perceived as being human–nature disconnection, and the solution a human–nature reconnection, then nature remains somehow set apart or ideal. The linguistic and philosophical constructions that enable the human viewer (or nature writer) to perceive nature as separate from cultural and technological processes of production remain invisible. This supports the observation that Tredinnick is judging one form of nature-otherness against another, less 'preferable' form of nature-otherness.

304 Gibson, above note 62, 75.
305 Baudrillard, above note 202.
306 Matthew, above note 171.
307 Lousely, above note 153.
For Lousely, it would be preferable to position nature within a more self-aware biocultural web and examine the interconnectedness between notions of what is human, what is produced by humans and what is non-human. When, as Lousely puts it, these ‘socio-ecological interactions become visible’ \(^{308}\) then the interdependencies themselves become recognisable; and when the interdependencies are recognisable, human activities and their effects may also be recognised a pressing political concern.

Tredinnick speculates that Australian colonial settler experiences gave rise to a lingering dysphoria about place and landscape. He proposes that as a result we have only a small body of national literature derived from an ‘intimate, mindful, musical literary engagement with landscapes’. \(^{309}\) In addition, Tredinnick focuses on utilising nature as a source of inspiration — whereupon nature-affinity arises in the writing as a result of the immersive method in which the writing is produced. This is distinct from the use of narrative and textual strategies (such as those identified here in the Kennedy's, Grenville's and Winton's work) that elevate or emphasise nature and landscape within the story.

This notion of nature engagement is also problematic for this reader: a nature writer, who places himself or herself in proximity to nature in order to reflect upon it and to produce an aesthetic artifact, demonstrates his or her belief that the landscape will providently comply with this aim (this perception of nature and landscape was discussed with reference to Michael McDowell previously). \(^{310}\) Several abstruse assumptions may be guessed at here. Has the nature writer assumed that nature is

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\(^{308}\) Lousely, above note 153.

\(^{309}\) Tredinnick, above note 101, 43. Notably, he includes Tim Winton as one such writer.

\(^{310}\) McDowell, in Glotfelty and Fromm, above note 8, 378.
possessed of a sort of anthropocentric benevolence? Or that nature exists to serve
human functions? If so, nature here gains meaning through its uses to people; such a
form of nature can readily be co-opted into human projects for self-examination.
Indeed, by positioning nature as a kind of filter through which to produce thoughtful
work, the nature writer assumes that nature is sympathetic to such a goal; that nature
will yield to his or her demands; and that being ‘free’ to experience ‘wild’ nature,
without the presence of man-made artifacts or artificial constraints, will produce
higher-order thought. The nature writer’s paradoxical relationship to nature
undermines the viability of his or her position, if the goal is to produce truly nature-
centric (and not anthropocentric) writing. I would argue that the nature writer’s notion
of nature-landscape — where nature is judged on its capacity to inspire good writing
— is not nature rethought. The position of the nature writer is made possible only
through a return to the view of nature-as-utility, produced by aesthetic or ideological
notions for a particular kind of twenty-first century pleasure: that is, for reflection, for
contemplation and revelation.311

The ecocritics agree that when landscape is portrayed in ways that emphasise its
usefulness to us — for example, as a place to escape the material concerns of urban
existence, a place to ponder on the beauty of the natural world, a place to undergo
significant personal change, a place to experience intensified relationships — that
portrayal has a limiting effect.312 Such a view fails to recognise other terms of value
(conservationist, ecological value, for example) and is therefore proscriptive,
commodifying and possessive.

311 To refer again to Mark Tredinnick’s essay: he claims that ‘genuine’ nature writing comes
about through a focused reflective engagement with the land: Tredinnick, above note 101, 43.
312 See for example a discussion about Bakhtin’s definition of landscape in McDowell, above
note 8, 378.
Kate Rigby makes a reference to the complicated status of the ‘nature writer’:

However the craft of nature writing might be conceived, there is a sense in which the nature writer is necessarily called to be a follower. Such writing, that is to say, necessarily follows nature: temporally, in that the natural world to which it refers is presumed to pre-exist the written text; normatively, in that this pre-existing natural world is implicitly valued more highly than the text which celebrates it; and mimetically, in that the text is expected to re-present this pre-existing and highly regarded natural world in some guise.

While she remains sympathetic to such writers’ intentions, she acknowledges that theirs is a flawed stance:

Let me stress at the outset, that I am all for the kind of writing (which comes in a wide variety of literary and non-literary genres) that calls upon its readers to revalue more-than-human beings, places and histories. In defence of such writing, along with the more-than-human beings, places and histories to which it bids us turn our concern, I am nonetheless going to argue here that the relation between nature and writing, especially in the literary mode, might best be thought otherwise.313

Tredinnick’s use of the term ‘pastoral’ for the less-preferred form of nature writing indicates he associates the idealising of nature with the pastoral poetic tradition or pastoral mode, which:

consolidated in the age of Elizabeth around a mood of otium and a celebration of the idyllic beauties and pleasures of the country.314

The pastoral tradition can be traced to Classical origins and is readily associated with sixteenth and seventeenth English poetic genres that looked to nature, landscapes and rural life for inspiration. Tredinnick’s use of the term pastoral connotes this form of rural idealism, which celebrates a contrived mode of country landscape and in which

a ‘simple’ existence in the country is reified against the moral and material temptations of a city existence.\textsuperscript{315} Note that Langton also draws a negative association between European-style pastoral renditions of the Australian landscape and the project of the white settler to Anglicise the landscape of Australia:

Landscapes revealed, like the earlier classical portraits of the noble savage, a reticence to render the Australian vistas, the quality of the light, the flora, other than in the traditions of Europe. The pastoral idyll of home appeared on the canvases and soon wherever settlers took their herds and axes.\textsuperscript{316}

Yet John Kinsella, West Australian poet and essayist, asserts a different usage of the term ‘pastoral’ for Australia and, in doing so, produces an opportunity to escape the dualism of Tredinnick’s, where nature representation is judged in terms of its authenticity — and where pastoral is ‘constructed’ nature and nature-centric writing is somehow more authentic:

Pastoral in Australia is about confrontation, recognition, conversation and, one would hope, reconciliation.\textsuperscript{317}

While it is beyond the scope of this dissertation to probe definitions of ‘pastoral’ further, it is useful to pause on Kinsella’s definition: the intention here is to seek vocabulary with which to discuss writing about nature that remain conscious of nature’s construction within (to quote Lousely) its ‘biocultural web’.\textsuperscript{318} It must also be acknowledged that Kinsella asserts various usages for the term pastoral — beyond simply as a term for the discussion of nature representation in literature.\textsuperscript{319}

\textsuperscript{316} Langton above note 113, 13.
\textsuperscript{317} Kinsella, above note 150.
\textsuperscript{318} Lousely, above note 153.
\textsuperscript{319} Kinsella, above note 149.
These qualifications notwithstanding, to this reader, Kinsella’s assertion of the definition of ‘pastoral’ provides a helpful conceptual distancing from the use of the term to represent the idealising pastoral imagery derived from the sixteenth and seventeenth century England.\textsuperscript{320} Instead, he positions ‘pastoral’ to include a form of active, embodied renegotiation of identities in the production of nature–landscape stories. Importantly for this dissertation, here Kinsella recognises that the natural landscape — the pastoral setting — is produced through a cultural process. His definition enables a discussion of nature that is aware of its human roots and conscious of its origins in discourse (consider here ‘conversation’). It is also aware of its debt to history, its gaps and silences (consider here ‘recognition’).

Kinsella’s quote also makes an allusion to the violence and vigour, already identified as a factor in the texts examined here, which inflects stories of the Australian landscape. We find convincing evidence of ‘confrontation’\textsuperscript{321} in Cate Kennedy’s The World Beneath, Tim Winton’s Dirt Music and Kate Grenville’s The Secret River. Indeed, from his use of the terms ‘confrontation’, ‘conversation’ and ‘reconciliation’\textsuperscript{322} it is clear that Kinsella believes that the represented Australian landscape remains contested and still attracts vigorous debate: here, divergent views may be expressed on the role of humans in nature; the significance of history to writing about places may be affirmed; and the imprint of post-colonial interrogations may be detected.

\textsuperscript{320} McCrae above note 313.
\textsuperscript{321} Kinsella, above note 149.
\textsuperscript{322} Kinsella, above note 149.
Lastly, his words ‘conversation and, one would hope, reconciliation’ are apposite for this dissertation. The characters in Cate Kennedy’s *The World Beneath*, Tim Winton’s *Dirt Music*, Kate Grenville’s *The Secret River* and ‘The Snake in the Rock’ must renegotiate relationships when forced to change — that is, when personal constraints are overcome thanks to meso-physical journeys, the characters must talk, reflect and connect in new ways. At the same time, the depicted human-nature relationship is also allowed to change, through a portrayal of nature as active, unexpected and unpredictable. By engaging in this dual processes of transformation, these contemporary meso-physical texts expand the lexicon of Australian writing about nature.

Returning, then to the meso-physical texts examined in this dissertation: does this review indicate they have succeeded in not idealising landscape and acknowledging the erasures that have become part of Australian landscape myth-making; in exploring possibilities for nature representation where nature is portrayed as an active agent; in opening textual representations of nature to a new recognition of the human interventions producing nature?

First to consider the idealisation of nature and landscapes: this reader finds some evidence of a reconfiguration of the human–nature relationship, through a portrayal of active and transformative nature. This reworking is observed as an element of narrative technique and links the texts at a strategic and ideological level. It is a central idea for this dissertation that two instances of reworking occur simultaneously — that is, the texts rework conceptual approaches to human–nature interactions while the characters themselves rework the rules of relationships that have previously

[323] Kinsella, above note 149.
seemed fixed. I propose that, when read collectively, the meso-physical texts (Cate Kennedy’s *The World Beneath*, Tim Winton’s *Dirt Music*, Kate Grenville’s *The Secret River* and ‘The Snake on the Rock’) contain representations of nature that share important commonalities and that contain significant recastings of nature that align with current critical concerns — these are representations which, in many ways, permit a new and necessary complexity for nature and landscape subjects (as Plumwood, for example, would wish).324

The natural landscape in these texts is in focus. It is not summarised or general. Indeed, nature is active and disruptive in these texts. For texts such as these that make no claims to the ‘authenticity’ of their nature representations, the discussion of ‘truth’ in nature can be set aside and any discussion may investigate questions which call to mind those quoted from Cheryl Glotfelty325 in this introduction: what is nature and landscape doing in these texts? Is nature active? Is landscape inscribed with the history that creates it? Plus, their collective significance — as a group with distinctive attributes — may be recognised.

I propose that these examples of Australian meso-physical narrative carve a niche of their own in nature writing: they assert a form of nature writing that acknowledges Romantic and vernacular aspects (consider *Dirt Music* and ‘The Snake in the Rock’ here, with their clear evocations of landscape but their romantic-love sentiments); that permits historically informed but imaginary stories (consider *The Secret River* and the ‘retelling’ of the true history of Solomon Wiseman); and that may adopt an ironic tone yet hold utterly serious political concerns at its heart (like *The World Beneath*,

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324 Plumwood, above note 32.
325 Glotfelty, above note 8.
whose characters must face their own cynicism about nature, climate change and ecology).

In addition, these texts demonstrate that nature and landscapes in literature can be rethought not just in the way they are produced — through ‘mindful engagement’,\textsuperscript{326} but in the role these tropes and elements play in a text. Natural landscapes may be granted a greater significance as a textual force; contemporary conversations about the environment and history may influence the representation of nature and the role of nature within a text; and landscape or place may play a greater role within the text’s overarching thematic concerns. Evidence of these kinds of rethinking can be found in Cate Kennedy’s \textit{The World Beneath}, Tim Winton’s \textit{Dirt Music} and Kate Grenville’s \textit{The Secret River} and ‘The Snake in The Rock’, where landscapes are discussed between characters; where places have a deep meaning at a thematic level; where history and settler experiences are discussed at textual and subtextual levels. In Cate Kennedy’s \textit{The World Beneath}, Tim Winton’s \textit{Dirt Music}, Kate Grenville’s \textit{The Secret River} and ‘The Snake in the Rock’, landscape is central to plot, structure, symbolism and action — that is, the natural landscapes visited or occupied by the characters are inextricable from the action, causing events and causing character change.

To address the second point: do these novels contain representations of nature that are active and disruptive? I propose that they do: the natural landscapes in these texts retain independence from human expectations. They are not compliant landscapes: the isolated coastal retreat in the Coronation Gulf sustains Luther Fox but is full of hidden perils; Cradle Mountain refuses to be a spectacle and insists on being ‘experienced’;

\textsuperscript{326} Using Tredinnick’s phrase.
the upper Hawkesbury hides the Aboriginal people when Will Thornhill is trying to find them and conceals them when he wishes they would return. Nature, here, is beyond human influence.

In these texts, the landscape descriptions are imbued with uniquely Australian sentiments and conundra: they show the combination of both terror of and love of the bush that has historically characterised Australian landscape writing, and they reference the conflict at the heart of much ‘bush’ writing — that the landscape can simultaneously threaten and shelter. While in some respects, the characters expect the natural landscape to affect them, the outcome of the characters’ nature-encounters is rarely as expected. Thornhill, Rich and Luther Fox expect their encounters to enable them to bring about a positive change: that is, Thornhill hopes to boost his economic status, Rich hopes to bring about positive change in relationships and Luther Fox hopes to find to shelter and draw connections to him. On face value, this suggests that these stories are aligned with a utilitarian and commodifying view of nature in which, yielding, fecund, pleasurable and stimulating nature is a positive force in human projects for self-development. Yet in all cases, the resulting engagement with nature is disruptive or violent. In this respect, Cate Kennedy, Tim Winton and Kate Grenville have shown characters at the mercy of the uncertainty and unpredictability of the landscape. This suggests a refutation of any anthropocentric expectations of nature’s function in serving human purposes.

In three of these texts, the chosen landscapes are wilderness landscapes. As previously discussed, the notion of wilderness carries a certain romantic and cultural significance in contemporary discourse. However, in each of the stories examined

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327 See Byerly, above note 103.
328 See Cronon, above note 9, and Langton, above note 114.
here, the characters discover that these wildernesses are already claimed and inhabited; they are discovered or discoverable, and human traces are ever-present. These landscapes do not deny human intervention (even Luther Fox discovers fishing rods, cans and supplies stashed in a cave in his isolated shoreline idyll). Once again, these are not entirely conforming wilderness landscapes.

The novels do not completely avoid falling back on Romantic notions of nature, however. While all three authors have created vigorously authentic descriptions of landscape, their stories conform to a certain dramatic-narrative arc, in which denouement is necessary: in which disaffected characters are brought, through confusion and contest, to social harmony and unity. Put simply, these stories resolve happily (that is, they follow the ‘up-ending’ story pattern remarked upon by Robert McKee in Story). It is my impression that all three novels have depicted their characters’ involvement with nature ending, eventually, in a positive social or emotional connection; in all four texts examined here (‘The Snake in the Rock’ included), the story concludes with the characters’ reaffirmation of social and human bonds. Luther Fox is rescued by Georgie who is released by Jim Buckridge from their relationship; Rich and Sophie are rescued by Sandy and their relationships are re-established on firmer ground; William Thornhill has his reflective moment of self-realisation; and Felix accepts his father’s past and embraces the future. Once these characters have been through metanoic transformation, they are able to see themselves and others more clearly. One might deduce, then, that while the portrayal of nature landscapes themselves are authentic and not romanticised, and characters’ expectations of their nature interaction are not entirely met, these three texts do not

329 See Blanning above note 59.
330 McKee, above note 73; on idealistic controlling ideas.
entirely invalidate the proposition that encounters with the natural landscape cause positive results.\textsuperscript{331}

Both Tim Winton’s \textit{Dirt Music} and Kate Grenville’s \textit{The Secret River} may be regarded as sentimental. In the case of \textit{Dirt Music}, the characters’ journeys through landscape are linked to a love story and, for this reader, the retreat to Coronation Gulf at the close of the text and Fox’s reunification there with Georgie is charged with romantic optimism. ‘The Snake in the Rock’ also concludes with the possibility of romantic love. In \textit{The Secret River} sentimentality arises as a result of the novel’s consideration of settler activities with the benefit of hindsight: it is possible that William Thornhill’s reflective scenes at the end of the novel reveal the author’s belief that an interrogation of conscience \textit{ought} to take place, when it is equally imaginable that a settler like Thornhill might not have questioned the morality of his actions for a moment.

Lastly, one must consider how well these texts acknowledge the ‘biocultural’ interactions between humans and nature, place and memory, memory and history. In these meso-physical texts, nature is not portrayed as independent of history or human intervention. Human actions in nature are both portrayed and discussed — for example, \textit{The World Beneath} remarks upon Tasmania’s rich history of cultural resistance and environmental activism, while also making reference to the extinction of the thylacine. For her characters, Kennedy’s natural places are deeply ‘human’ and William Thornhill feels attached to his land as if it were his child. In \textit{Dirt Music}, Luther Fox and the van-load of fellow travellers make a visit to the ghost town of Wittenoom, home to abandoned asbestos mines and a ‘site’ of death, injustice and

\textsuperscript{331} This could be regarded as nature romanticised; or as an anthropocentric-utilitarian view of nature.
industrial disregard for human lives. As the textual analyses discuss, these novels identify places as receptacles of history and narrative — where, as Baudrillard asserts, history is:

a myth that at once subtended the possibility of an "objective" enchainment of events and causes and the possibility of a narrative enchainment of discourse.\textsuperscript{332}

In addition, these meso-physical texts also make both direct and indirect comment on the consequences of human interactions (as conceptual co-creators and destroyers) of the natural world. Tim Winton’s and Kate Grenville’s texts both make a subtle commentary on ecological and environmental subjects, by revealing the attitudes of characters and by carefully directing reader sympathies. Indeed, \textit{The World Beneath} makes a direct comment on environmental politics by including this issue as a straightforward point of discussion between characters.

These elements, taken together, reveal these three meso-physical texts to be very much a product of this time — where the ‘temporal torsions of anthropogenic climate change’\textsuperscript{333} and their effects on people and on historic-cultural senses of place must be considered.

\textsuperscript{332} Baudrillard above note 202, 47.  
\textsuperscript{333} Farrier D above note 21.
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