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# Maps for the lost: A collection of short fiction And Human / nature ecotones: Climate change and the ecological imagination: A critical essay

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# **Maps for the lost**

*A collection of short fiction*

- and -

## **Human / nature ecotones:**

# **Climate change and the ecological imagination**

*A critical essay*

This thesis is presented for the degree of

**Doctor of Philosophy**

**Susan Heather Greenhill**

Edith Cowan University

Faculty of Education and Arts

School of Communications and Arts

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## Abstract

The thesis comprises a collection of short fiction, *Maps for the Lost*, and a critical essay, “Human / Nature Ecotones: Climate Change and the Ecological Imagination.”

In ecological terms, areas of interaction between adjacent ecosystems are known as ecotones. Sites of relationship between biotic communities, they are charged with fertility and evolutionary possibility. While postcolonial scholarship is concerned with borders as points of cross-cultural contact, ecocritical thought focuses upon the ecotone that occurs at the interface between human and non-human nature.

In their occupation of the liminal zones between human and natural realms, the characters and narratives of *Maps for the Lost* reveal and nurture the porosity of conventional demarcations. In the title story, a Czech artist maps the globe by night in order to find his lover. The buried geographies of human landscapes coalesce with those of the non-human realm: the territories of wolves and the scent-trails of a fox mingle imperceptibly with nocturnal Prague and the ransacked villages of post-war Croatia. In “Seeds,” a narrative structured around the process of biological growth, the lost memories of an elderly woman are returned to her by her garden. “The Skin of the Ocean” traces the obsession of a diver who sinks his yacht under the weight of coral and fish, while in “Drift,” an Iranian refugee writes letters along the tide-line of a Tasmanian beach.

The essay identifies the inadequacy of literature and literary scholarship’s response to the threat of climate change as a failure of the imagination, reflecting the transgressive dimension of the crisis itself, and the dualistic legacy which still informs Western discourse on non-human nature. In order to redress this shortfall, which I argue the current generations of writers have an urgent moral responsibility to do, it is critical that we learn to understand the natural world of which we are a part, in ways that cast off the limitations of conventional representation. Paradoxically, it is the profoundly disruptive (apocalyptic?) nature of the climate crisis itself, which may create the imaginative traction for that shift in comprehension, forcing us, through loss, to interpret the world in ways that have been forgotten, or are fundamentally new.

By analysing Alexis Wright’s *The Swan Book*, and Les Murray’s “Presence” sequence, the essay explores the correlation between imaginative and ecological processes, and the role of voice, embodiment, patterning and story in negotiations of nature and place. In the context of the asymptotical essence of the relation between text and world, and the paradox of

phenomenological representation, it calls for a deeper cultural engagement with scientific discourse and indigenous philosophy, in order to illuminate the multiplicity and complexity of human connections to the non-human natural world.

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The declaration page  
is not included in this version of the thesis



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For my daughter Lily, who arrived during the writing of this thesis,  
and for my father, John, who left.



## Maps for the Lost



## Maps for the Lost

Most nights, he walks until the dawn light seeps into the laneways of the city, until the industrial drone of street-sweepers fills the calm of Wenceslas Square, and commuters, shops and cafés spill out onto the pavements and lanes of Staré Mesto.

He doesn't remember when it was that the city changed, if there was one fated moment when its spirit – sealed safe beneath the gunnels of a rowing boat – had drifted out, wide into the currents of the Vltava, and left behind a daylight world of vague and soulless beauty. What remains is a Prague built of surfaces and names: a metropolis of tourist sites, while life retreats into the darkness and the forests.

At midnight, the streets stir with wanderers and thieves, and the river, which pulses through the heart of the city like a question, becomes lithe and glows with moonlight and reflections of stone and lime. Tomáš walks for miles along the banks of the Vltava, through the streets of Mala Strana, and deep into the labyrinthine old town, Staré Mesto, where the names of lanes have changed so many times in the past century alone that becoming lost is inevitable, and vanishing is easy.

It's August, and the late summer heat stretches deep into the night like an east wind, heavy with citrus from the hill gardens of Hradcany. It throws light onto the skin, breath and curves of his memory where she still lives, where the juice of blood oranges runs down her wrists and into his sleep-heavy mouth, and the skies over Dubrovnik are still clear, the blue world still whole.

On the embankment, the leaves of a plane tree, withered with age, are already beginning to turn. The quietest things remind him of her. In Dubrovnik – that distant, circled city – in the first days of autumn he'd moved into her stone flat, high above the street. He'd found work as a diver on the Adriatic coast, and spent most of his days beneath the surface of a sea that seemed to him eternally blue. On weekends, they slept through the heat of the sun, and cooked paella with shellfish from the mouth of the Neretva, bartered from the fishermen who set up their stalls under wide red umbrellas in the shade of the wall.



They were imperfect, tempestuous lovers. They'd moved in together only days after meeting. He had a life in Prague but it paled in comparison to the touch of this clear-hearted, Nereidian girl. Hers was a city of a thousand steps, bitter-orange and almond trees and the delta of an underground river. Their nights were spent rowing between the fishing boats in the harbour, across the broken mirror of the sea.

Iluka woke slowly and spoke in her sleep. She carried armloads of books on the ocean home from the library; photographs of dark chunks of ambergris and cuttlefish papered their bedroom walls. She laughed and cried too easily, it made him feel empty. When they argued, she'd sit reading in the light of the window, twisting her blonde hair unconsciously into a tangled, intractable knot.

They'd listened to the war unfolding around them on the radio in Iluka's room. When the tanks moved into Krajina, and the apartments around theirs had emptied overnight, he'd asked her to come with him, back to his land-locked country in the north. But despite the danger she'd chosen to return to the village of her family in the hills.

For weeks they'd spoken on the telephone, between Prague and Rilje, long into the night. For those moments of talking she seemed warm and close. He'd heard the rain on the roof below the sound of her voice, and her mother crying in the kitchen on the night that Vukovar had fallen. As they spoke, the world around them trembled and cracked. He remembered feeling fractured but impossibly whole. Their love seemed invulnerable.

He moves across a footbridge where a streetlight flickers intermittently in the darkness. Further down the river, in an empty car park backing onto the Metro, the sleepless drift between rows of stalls and makeshift cafés. He buys absinthe from an ice-cream van that's lit by candles and dripping with wax, and leans back against a low wall covered in graffiti. The air is heavy with insects and lilac, the heat-scent of cities and unfiltered cigarettes.

Since she disappeared he has found a kind of refuge here, among these nocturnal people. He watches the flow of figures through the market. They have the air of sleepwalkers, a trance-like combination of aimlessness and purpose. He imagines how they'd appear if he could look down on the city from some great height: as if they were marking out invisible maps, or tracing constellations. Perhaps unravelling some fine thread of memory through the darkness.

At the far end of the park, he notices a small crowd gathered in the shadows of a pine hung with strings of paper lanterns and rust-coloured lights. As he walks closer he sees Ivan, an exiled Croat who works with Tomaš' grandfather in the factories on the perimeter of the city. Ivan stands in darkness behind a low, covered table. His audience, mostly junkies and the fearless children who creep between the market stalls like cats, watch intently as he glides his palms across the convex surface of a great glass jar. Beneath his fingertips, clouds of fireflies move as if his hands were magnetically charged. They glow like satellites, or tiny planets drawn into lilting, elliptical orbit.

When he sees Tomaš, Ivan calls him over to the stall and grips his hand in both of his. For a while they move around the market, talking briefly with acquaintances, trading politics and his grandfather's worn-out jokes. There's a bond of memory, or forgetting, between the two men – one old now, one young – that draws them together but makes both uneasy. As they walk Tomaš notices the trace of sadness in Ivan's low laugh, the way he moves quickly between fragments of conversation, as if some threat were waiting in the silence.

The river slows now, grows silken and eely and dark. Tomaš smokes a little of Ivan's bitter tobacco, then hesitates for a moment before reaching into his backpack.

'I've got something you might be interested in,' he says quietly, unrolling the papers that he passes to his friend. 'I found this among some old journals of Kolya's... and I remembered your village wasn't far from Krajina ...? It's just a story but it was written before the war began and I thought perhaps ... I don't know ... I thought of you, so if you're interested, it's yours.'

Turning from the river, Ivan lifts the papers up into the light. As he reads, the lines around his grey eyes deepen in the firelight. Yet for a moment he looks younger; some distant youth blushes across his face like a lost friend. He pauses briefly when he's finished reading. Then, crumpling the story into the pocket of his jacket, he walks back to his stall where a small girl is standing, gazing up at the hypnotic performance of the fireflies. Ivan smiles down at her and gestures theatrically as he releases the lid of the jar. The creatures dart upwards, tracing light above the pine trees and spires of the city until they vanish like meteors into the night.

He walks. In the parklands by the river, the earth-tones of a violin hang suspended in the night air. The music moves inside his head. It travels through the full, soft languor of his memories, into the folds and faded cotton of her thin dress with its siren's calls – now fragile, now clear.

*Iluka.*

The syllables of her name seem to gather like driftwood, like reeds along the rock curves of the riverbed, and nest as swallows – there, and there – beneath the reaches of the Karluv Most.

On the rocks beside the water's edge, still blood-warm with sunlight, he dreams of her village in the hills of central Croatia – the stillness of the mountains and the white, dark mists that fill the ruins of her home. He sees the grapevines and the cypresses, limbs entwined and reaching through the ashen shells of churches; the dew-wet webs that hang like jewels across the blackened hallways. When night falls, packs of grey wolves haunt the bridges and the orchards. Staircases tumble into hanging darkness. Layers of iron and shattered stone sink into the earth.

As he walks, he gathers the corners of his memory together in his arms like some rare gift, some precious and half-remembered dream. Each night he re-imagines the contours of her fate. He pictures her beginning her days in a tower block in some anonymous city, in Budapest or Istanbul, Zagreb or Berlin. He sees her shaping a new life, a new language, in a fishing village in Leguria, or tending olive-groves and vineyards on the island of Miljet. In his head she swallows salted cheese and calamari pulled from the ocean. She's sleeping, diving deep from polished rocks, running in from the street in unforecasted rain. And every day, as he is, she is forgetting, remembering, beginning again.

Traffic lights pass from green to amber to red as he crosses the empty streets. At an intersection close to the centre of town, an old, homeless woman wearing the layered, traditional dress of the country, waits, hunched over, for the lights to change.

It is not a city that displays its wounds. Within the floodlit walls of the old town square, that in daylight is crowded with hawkers and tourists, he pauses by the foot of a statue, built to honour a great reformer. Behind him, a beer can rolls into a gutter as stray dogs pull rubbish from a garbage tin. White moths, exhausted by their attraction to the light, fall across the cobblestones like quivering snow. He could remember standing on the edge of this square, looking in, with his father, as a child. It was raining. They'd spent the day at his father's office in Nove Mesto, and they stopped to stare through a sea of umbrellas at a brass band playing a fickle salute to the latest, unloved regime. Like the street-names, the monuments of the city tend to change with each passing incarnation. Beside the statue where he sits there's a circle of ground, where the moths lie trembling in the unrelenting light, and the cobblestones are smooth, like the skin across a scar.

He walks. To the west, on a street not far from the square, between a marionette theatre and the Chapel of Mirrors, is the library where he works. With the image of the fireflies still in his head, he unlocks a side-door, hidden from the public entrance that faces the street. Inside, after entering a security code into a panel of numbered switches, he turns on the lights in the reference hall, three flights of stairs above him.

At night, the building is unheated and dark. Occasionally he meets a security guard or a cleaner on their way to the office, where they drink ink-black coffee and wile away the dusty, soundless hours. Tonight, other than a strip of light beneath the door of a room on the second floor, the building seems to be empty.

For several hours he catalogues the piles of books that have been left unsorted on trolleys, and re-shelves the hardbacks the day staff have missed, that have been left behind in alcoves and corners. Once in a while he lets the printed words on the back of a book-sleeve catch his eye, but mostly he tries not to read, or even pay attention to the titles. His thoughts are only on the collections of maps in the basement below.

The archives are stored in an underground vault two flights of stairs beneath the street. The light here is low and tinged with green. Even at this hour he goes through the ritual of signing himself in, and puts on a pair of the filmy gloves that he finds in a box on the archivist's desk. Outside, a group of pigeons, disturbed from sleep, re-settle themselves on a window ledge. One of the projectors used for viewing microfilm has been left on in a corner; it hums periodically and gives off a faint and pulsing orange glow.

Along the opposite wall the maps and charts are secured in steel cabinets. Barely checking the labels, as he has a clear idea of the trays through which he has already searched, he pulls out one of the drawers. He lifts aside the sheets of crepe that separate the parchments, and slides the maps one by one onto the table.

He never knows what it is he's looking for. He feels an odd affection for the pastel, hand-coloured diagrams on the page, the way the paper feels heavy against his palms, and the Gothic illustrations evoking the perils and charms of exotic lands. The adornments seem naïve and are often grotesque, but he knows they were created with calculated skill, and the maps themselves were at times used as weapons of ruthless, political power. These are not charts that he can carry home and use in his work, they are old, and important, but they lead him towards the kind of maps that are lost or overlooked in the collections of museums.

Time passes, and the sound of a cleaner on the stairs above him breaks his concentration. Glancing at his watch, he slides a street map of Bucharest in a laminated sleeve back into place

in the drawer. Still wearing the gloves, like a thief, he leaves the archives and walks back out to the street, and the dark banks of the Vltava.

The night grows cold. Across the river, in a quarter of the city where brothels and clubs line a maze of lanes, there's a nightclub he used to go to often with Iluka. He's been there infrequently since returning from Dubrovnik, and other than chance meetings in the city or the market it's the only real contact he has with his friends. They're gentle with him, and it's embedded in their culture to understand the burden of loss, but since she disappeared he feels like the colour has gone from his conversation. At times he feels acutely self-conscious, as though he's been singled out by the floodlights that haunt the inner city with their ghostly light. He imagines his grief is visible in his face, like the fine lines that seem to have multiplied during the last difficult months. Even the deeper things they talk of, the philosophy and politics, seem oddly futile, even naïve. It makes him feel old, and for this reason he finds it easier to be alone, or in the company of his grandfather and acquaintances like Ivan.

The tiny club is squeezed into a basement under the street. Because of its complex history, the city is riddled with vaults and tunnels that now house theatres and late-night cafés. Inside, although the low ceiling is illuminated with webs of silver lights, it's almost as dark as it is on the street. The floorboards and the glasses on the tables vibrate with the base of the German trance. Across the dance floor, in the darkest corner, he sees a group of his friends drinking absinthe shots, stirring teaspoons of molten sugar into tumblers of the wormwood liqueur.

'Tomaš!' They greet him with hugs and drunken kisses. By the bar, Sasha, whom he's known since he was a child, is talking with a girl in a wool dress the shade of the absinthe she drinks. He knows her vaguely through mutual friends.

'Tomaš, this is Virginie, Virginie – Tomaš.' Sasha motions to an empty table and they sit.

'We've met,' Virginie smiles. 'Are you drinking, Tomaš?' Without waiting for his reply she stands and turns back towards the bar. The music gets to him a little. It's too loud and too familiar, but Sasha is a good friend and he feels almost relaxed as he settles into the booth.

'I like her,' Sasha glances back at Virginie. 'We've been out a couple of times. She's a journalist, she writes for the Metro. But how's life, anyway? Are you still working on the map?' Tomaš nods and slides the ash-tray back and forth across the table. Even with Sasha he feels uncomfortable discussing his work.

'I'm getting a couple of shifts at the library, filling shelves after hours. I've just come from there actually.' He shakes his head as Sasha offers his lit cigarette. 'It gives me access to

the archives as well...even at night, which is a bonus.' He pushes his hair away from his eyes. 'But I think I'm becoming allergic to dust.'

Virginie returns to the table with three glasses of becherovka, a bitter, herb-based liqueur.

'Are you going to exhibit?' she asks, looking searchingly at Tomaš, as Sasha rests his hand on her knee and takes a drink. 'Sasha told me about your maps. I know the curator of the Golden through my job, if you're after a contact.'

'Sure, maybe at some stage ...' Aware he sounds elusive, Tomaš tries to avoid her eyes. He wonders how much Sasha has told her about his life. Reaching for his drink, he briefly meets her gaze, but there's something in the way she straightens her dress and smiles that makes the club seem unbearably small. 'To be honest, it's not really that kind of work ... but thanks for the offer.'

The music changes and Virginie pulls Sasha, laughing and mouthing apologies to Tomaš, out onto the dance floor. The bechorovka warms his belly and his throat and he begins to feel light-headed. He goes over to the bar but instead of ordering a drink, he finds himself telling his friends that he's leaving, and despite their protests, moves back up the stairs and into the cool of the quiet street.

He walks. By the time he reaches the house, though the city is still in darkness, the street lamps are losing their intensity to the dawn, and the remaining stars and satellites are fading into light. His grandfather, Kolya, who begins his shift at the factory at five, is sitting drinking coffee in the unlit courtyard. Joining him at the table, Tomaš stretches back into his chair and looks up at the sky already streaked with vapour trails, and the silhouettes of the tower blocks closing in around the old stone house.

'I saw Ivan last night,' he takes a mouthful of his grandfather's bitter coffee, 'at the night-market. He asked after you.' Kolya smiles and, opening a tin of tobacco, rolls his first cigarette of the morning. They sit together in silence. Tomaš tries to stifle a yawn. He can feel his eyes are bloodshot, and can hardly remember the last time he slept. After several minutes, he gets up from the table and goes into his bedroom for a jacket. At the far end of the hall, the small room opens out onto the lane that runs behind the cottage. He pulls a jacket from a basket at the end of his bed. It's a cramped room. Stretched across it, from the corner of the window to the door, there's a clothesline with pages of an atlas pegged out like washing drying in the early

sun. Next to the bed a cardboard box overflows with street guides and city plans. A sextant and compass lie under the bedside lamp. Diagrams of archaeological digs are scattered across the floor.

Taped on the wall above his father's oak desk is his only photograph of Iluka. The last frame on a disposable camera, its edges are flooded with coloured light. She is sitting in the stern of a rowing boat they'd hired; it looks unstable, as though it's rocking. She's laughing, looking into the lens and clutching the rails as he stands to take the picture. There's a bottle of wine in the bottom of the boat and behind her the city is shrouded in fog, as though trying to hide from the camera's gaze.

In the kitchen, he pours himself the last of the coffee. Their neighbour's wispy, tortoiseshell kitten settles into Kolya's lap. As if out of nowhere, a low jet arcs across the sky with a piercing thunder. It's a frequent event, and one they should have grown used to by now. But watching it from the doorway, Tomaš feels the wood around the door reverberate under his fingers. The coffee ripples in the cup on the table, and the frightened cat disappears over the wall. He thinks of Ivan, who lost his children to the senseless war that still continued in the south, and the fears that he and Kolya have spoken of too often in the past few months pass involuntarily through his mind. He pictures Iluka, there among the ruins of her village, where the pear trees bend their fruit down to her waiting mouth, her hands bandaged and broken. Moving over to his grandfather, he cups his palm on the back of the old man's head, and draws their foreheads together in silence, like a ritual.

'It may not feel like it now,' Kolya whispers, 'but you'll live through this. I know you will. And if she's alive, it's your art, your magic that will bring her back to us.'

The dull glow of a street-light shines into a room cluttered with books and rolls of charts. It's the last night of the summer, and through the open window drifts the music of a radio, barking dogs and traffic and the sweet, uncensored squeals and lazy giggling of a child.

'Art is a secret source of great courage,' his grandfather had told him, on that silver morning when they had woken to find the city papered with posters of ironic, political humour. When every windowpane, train station, monument and streetcar was covered with the images of a revolution, with the soft swords that would overthrow a dictatorship. 'There is a power there – for subversion, for sustenance – which can bring strength to any darkness.'

In the half-light, Tomaš clears a space on the desk and glances briefly at the picture on the wall. He unrolls a chart of the blue Adriatic, scribbled with coordinates and shipping lanes, and anchors it under the weight of books on the corners of the desk. In the centre, pencilled lines run across the coasts of a group of diamond-shaped islands. They have quaint, musical names from a time when an old language merged with another. He copies them down on a writing pad, and later will compare them with the titles he finds on the maps in the holdings of the library.

As the room darkens around him, he traces the ridgeline of a long-contested mountain, tracks the geometric lines that carve up a city, the valleys flooded with crimson ink. Some of the charts are moth-eaten in places, or almost translucent from exposure to sun. There are atlases, piled to the ceiling by the door, which are sticky with wood-smoke and coated with dust.

Outside, the sounds of the evening fade and are replaced, one by one, by the sounds of the night. Under his fingers, traces of buried maps remain visible through the slowly changing layers of the globe. The shadows of continents and a war-torn plateau can still be seen beneath the surface. Tearing out the places that have disappeared from memory, he takes the shapes and names that have been lost to war, to politics, to history, and with a soft brush, pastes them over the surface of the spinning, wooden globe.

The nameless ruins of an abandoned village rest safely on the banks of the wide Miangin River, which flows into a sea of islands, between the thin, volcanic mountains of Kanaky, the atoll of Niulakita. Across the hot and clear subcontinent of Bharat cuts the Saraswati River. The borders of lost cities are left frayed and overlapping. Czechoslovakia, the country of his parents, and the heart-shaped island of Trowenna – silver-green with middens of shell and stolen tracts of forest – drift, like great ships, over the surfaces of oceans, through a universe of the disappeared, the unaligned, the lost.

Most nights, despite his longing, it's here that she lives – in this borderless Earth.

\*

In the midnight-dark, a small crowd gathers around a drum of fire on the Mánesuv Most, listening silently to the brandy-soaked poetry of a cellist. On the edges of the light, a young boy walks slowly. The damp, black nose of a fox cub, cradled in his jacket, peaks out into the air.



From the opposite side of the river, Tomaš stops and watches as the boy pulls back the folds of the fabric, and the red fur of the cub shines hot in the firelight.

‘The fox is yours for a tenner!’ the boy calls out through the darkness, lowering his voice as he crosses the bridge. ‘We found him in a warehouse out the back of Hradcany.’ He stands for a moment, shifting his weight from foot to foot as if pacifying a baby, and then looks curiously at Tomaš. ‘It’s up for demolition. We don’t know what to do with him. I guess he’s most likely better off in the woods somewhere ... but he’s yours if you want him.’

The small fox turns his eyes towards Tomaš, and fixes him – there – in his amber gaze, with his molten fear. The night seems to slow and the music fade. Almost without thinking, Tomaš takes his wallet from the pocket of his jeans and crumples the largest of the notes into the boy’s outstretched hand. Having nothing with which to hold the cub, he pulls off his jacket, and takes the gently trembling creature in his arms. It’s lighter than he imagined, and warm.

In a futile attempt at hiding, the quivering cub pushes his nose into the dark under Tomaš’ arm. For a moment, he wonders if he should just put him down and let him go, perhaps release him on the slopes of Petrin Hill. But the fox is so small and young he knows instinctively that it wouldn’t survive in the city alone. Slowly at first, without a clear sense of where to go or what it is he should do, he begins to walk, and finds himself heading in the direction of home.

At the house, quietly, so as not to wake Kolya, Tomaš gets his backpack from the cupboard in the hall. Leaving the cub, wrapped in a blanket, in one of the boxes of maps that he empties out onto the bed, he goes into the kitchen and fills two plastic containers with food for himself, and frozen meat for the fox. He leaves a note for his grandfather on the kitchen bench, and slides the photograph of Iluka between the pages of his notebook. With a final look around his bedroom, he ties a rug across his shoulder to form a sling where he cradles the fox, then folding the globe into one of his shirts, he nestles it into the top of his pack then pulls the drawstring and seals the buckles tight.

He walks towards the river. In moments of darkness, he had imagined taking a boat from the moorings on the river-bank, pushing out and letting go. He’d pictured himself lying against the floor of the boat, letting it drift downstream with the current, and falling asleep to be woken by the sounds of fishing boats out on the open sea.

Among several pulled up in a shallow bend, the boat he chooses is narrow and black, its sharp prow buried in a bank of reeds. Glancing up at the stone path above him, he takes what’s left of his cash from his wallet and slides it under the cleat where the boat is tied. Climbing in, clinging

tightly to the cub, now whining gently and twisting in his arms, he slips the stern line first and then unties the bow, and lets the night current steer the boat clear of the bank.

At first, when he lets him climb free from the sling, the fox is unsteady on his feet, and hesitant, looking out at the water, but Tomaš feeds him scraps of the thawed meat he has stowed in his pack, and in time he curls up beneath the gunnels and sleeps. Fashioning his jacket and the empty sling into a pillow, Tomaš leans back against the wooden seat. There is little movement on the river-bank, although he knows that in a few hours the night-market will begin, and people will appear between the shadows of the trees.

Despite his work, his knowledge of where the river will take them is hazy. He knows that before they leave the city they'll pass under seven bridges, and that they'll travel first north, then west, through country that's forested and cold. As they drift, he starts to notice the rush of the once silent river that laps beneath the hull, and the faintest constellations appear above them in the widening gaps in the smog. He knows those stars and the river form part of a map, that's moving, and cannot be named. He thinks of Iluka, of the invisible paths that stretch out into the distance. In the backpack, under the paws of the sleeping cub, the earth-globe glows, with hope, with light.

## Forest

‘Since woodchipping began 31 years ago, Tasmanians have known the unspeakable sadness of great forests of mystery transformed into ash. For 31 years, they have watched as one more extraordinary place after another of their country has been sacrificed to the woodchippers. Beautiful places, holy places, lost not only to them, but forever.’

Richard Flanagan, “The Rape of Tasmania” (2003)

‘I want to say to the bear, they want your home, you know. Hold out as long as you can. Eat my table leavings if you must. A lot of us will be going down the river with you. The last unyielding days will be beautiful, I believe. I do not think the bear will ever honour the request to dance.’

Barry Lopez, “Natural Grief”

The devils were sleeping in a corner of the courtyard. Two tiny females, they’d been picked up by the drivers of two separate cars, who’d killed their mothers on different country roads. Joe felt uncomfortable about waking them, but before he could protest, Esther had climbed into their pen and was lifting the smaller of the two in her arms.

‘This is Nora.’ The pup’s dark eyes were open now, squinting into the light, and she was yawning, not only from sleepiness, Esther explained, but as a mechanism to relieve the stress of being handled. ‘She’s alright though, aren’t you, sweetheart? She’s getting used to being molly-coddled.’ Esther tickled the fur under the devil’s chin, which she seemed to enjoy. Her black, shining body wasn’t much larger than Esther’s hands. ‘Why don’t you hold her?’ Without waiting for his reply, Esther passed the devil to Joe. The pup quivered slightly and then lowered her chin as though relaxing, or resigned, and let it rest against his forearm.

Despite the building’s location between arterial roads and opposite the working port, the courtyard was mostly silent. Inside, behind the windows, people passed quickly through the corridors of the museum. Now and then a gull flew low across the square of sky overhead.

‘I’ll be in my office, Ok?’ Joe registered Esther’s voice with a nod as she disappeared through the door behind him. For some time he stood alone by the pen with the pup light in his arms, ruffling his fingers through the coarse, sometimes glistening fur on the back of her

neck. The air was so still he could hear the quiet, rhythmic wheeze of the devil's breath. He thought of her life in the forest and longed to stay there in the courtyard all through the afternoon, as the traffic thickened and his shift at the restaurant began then ended without him. But stroking the fur of the pup's warm chest, he leant over the pen and put her down by the box where her companion sat waiting, awake now, and watchful.

The devil was still in his head as he pushed down on the pedals of his bike. The hills below his home were steep, the streets uneven and winding. It was late, and the houses were in darkness. Between the dull fluorescence of the street-lamps the only light came from the flickering lamp on the handlebars of the bike.

For the past year he'd rented a weatherboard house on Waterworks road, where he lived with Therese, a middle-aged woman who worked in the Greens office, and her dog, Leo. Just ten minutes walk above the city, the valley was quiet and shaded. On the northern side a walking track carved into the bank below an abandoned quarry, now frequented by climbers, wound its way into the Waterworks reserve, where two large reservoirs pooled the rain and the snow-melt from the mountain. It was a quaint valley, with an air of having been forgotten by the steadily modernising city below.

Above the reserve, a hundred walking tracks zigzagged the slopes of the mountain. In the forests the pale skeletons of huge eucalypts, remnants of the 1967 fires, rose above the canopy as ghostly reminders of loss and change. When he walked those paths he tried to imagine how the mountain appeared when those trees still lived. In the rainforest, to the west, there were ferns and conifers that were little changed from those that stood in pre-historic Gondwanan times. It wasn't easy to put into words how that made him feel. It made him look differently at the milky night sky. It changed the way he watched the low clouds roll like swell across the mountain at his back. The rhythm of things.

When he reached the house he wheeled the bike around the back. The path was lined with the damp, discarded leaves of the virginia creeper. The night air smelt of willow, and he could just hear the sound of the creek above the rush of the wind in the trees. Leo was waiting at the door to meet him with his coat ruffled by sleep and his eyes half-shut. Without turning on the lights, he filled a bottle with water, stretched out on the couch and flicked the television between channels. He fell asleep with the dim light drifting across his face. On the screen, lines of yellow words appeared and disappeared with the rhythm of speech, and as he slept, a man with a rifle and pack followed a school of salmon upstream.

His home was an island of ends and lost things. Before he was born, his parents flew into Lake Pedder during its last, shining weeks. They walked on the sand of that vast quartz beach, shadowed by rings of mountains. Around them people moved with the kind of attentive reverence known only to those who recognise the face of loss. As the high clouds sailed like gulls across the lake, they took photographs, light planes landed on the sand, children swam in the shallows. In the last days lone campers painted and wrote; documentaries were made. Back in Hobart they queued outside the city hall in the rain to see the slides Olegas Truchanus had brought back from his trips into the wild. They sat mesmerised and breathless on fold-out chairs as one after another of the images appeared and faded to a soundtrack of Sibelius, photographs of the lake about to be flooded by those who had never seen or visited the place.

Catherine, his older sister, had been arrested on her sixteenth birthday in an inflatable raft on the Franklin. Those battles were with different governments, and different departments, but the destruction, the corruption and the profit margins were the same.

Though he tried, he couldn't find the words to say exactly what it was that kept him on that sometimes claustrophobic, often stale-minded island, and continuing to fight its protracted war. After work, late at night, he wrote page after failed page about that secret, un-nameable thing. He sat before his laptop and longed to make some difference. Sometimes the grief intensified into anger that words seemed incapable of pinning down. He imagined smashing shop-fronts, over-turning cars, lighting fires. There were people on his island who did those things, who blackened wood-chips with tar, or drove spikes into old-growth trees targeted for chipping. He didn't know those people well, they were shadows and ghosts and he recognised that at times they cast an unwelcome pall across the fight for the forests, but he knew where the anger came from, he had felt it in his own heart, in his own gut.

He first saw the angel in early spring, while the last snow of winter lay unmelted in the mountains. He'd spent most of the morning at a protest at Forestry's Air-Walk, south of Hobart, designed to draw attention to the logging in the forests of the Weld, beyond the Huon, and the buffer zones created for the benefit of the tourists. There were old-growth forests there, ear-marked for clear-felling, containing huge myrtles, sassafras, un-charted waterfalls and warrens of unexplored limestone karst. The tourist road began with a locked gate.

Early that morning, three of their group, dressed in aging possum suits, had climbed into the tree-tops close to the apex of the Air-Walk. They hung a banner out between them with painted

words about the threatened Weld and an image of an eagle. They sat up there all day talking with the tourists, and later, with the police who gathered below.

It wasn't until late in the day that he saw her. Taking a break from handing out leaflets to tourists on the bridge, he'd followed a short track through stands of myrtles to a bend in the river upstream. After a week of equinoxial gales the water was high and quick. Rain fell intermittently on the canopy of the trees. It collected in the myrtle's heart-shaped leaves until the branches sagged beneath the water's weight.

He'd been thinking of the devils and a conversation he'd had that morning, with Adam, who had co-ordinated the action. They were standing in a grove of leatherwood not far from the bridge, pulling a sheet of plastic across a card-table covered in petitions, anchoring its corners with smooth river-rocks. In a moment at first punctuated by Adam's ringing phone, Joe had told him about the devil he'd held at the museum. He was aware that the pups were both at risk of developing the cancer that had recently spread through the devil population, placing them firmly on the endangered species list.

'There was something about it that keeps playing on my mind,' he'd said. 'Like it meant something that I didn't understand.' He crouched on the ground with one hand tightening the laces of his boots, the other attempting to keep their posters out of the now heavy rain. 'Does that make sense? Like there's something I've missed...' Adam pulled a daypack out from under the table, and zipped his mobile into the pocket of his jacket.

'There probably is something.' He drew the hood of the coat over his head. Behind him the clouds were lowering, sinking below the canopy of the forest. 'But we're all missing it – and that's why we're here right? That's what makes life worth living.' He'd smiled. 'You're thinking too much.' Joe watched as he poured two river-coloured teas out of a thermos. Balancing the cups, they'd walked to the bank and leant on the trunk of a eucalypt that arched across the water. Adam lit the blackened end of a joint and offered him a drag. Letting the smoke slide like a snake into his lungs, he'd waited to feel its quiet affects before releasing it slowly between his lips.

Where the track passed between several large boulders and a stand of celery-top pines, he bent to pass under a fallen log, heavy with moss and lichen. Clusters of brilliant scarlet fungi were feeding off its rotting wood. As the rain eased, and the sounds of the tourists began to fall away, the track opened out onto a small quartz beach, the shape of a quarter-moon. The river there was fringed with huon pine and large, glossy laurels. River-stones, as smooth as glass, banked up against the gritty sand, forming a low isthmus out to a group of larger boulders,

protruding from the water several metres from the shore.

He hadn't noticed her among the others as they prepared for the protest. He hadn't come across her wings among the banners, or her feathers, or her heavy, muslin dress. She stood alone on the rocks in the river like a heron, stretching out damp wings to dry in the sun. Like her feathers, her face, neck and hands were pale with powder, and her long hair, also dusted white, was braided and wrapped around her head like a halo or a silver crown. She looked across the river into the forest beyond. Her expression reminded him oddly of the devil who'd waited, watchful, in the courtyard of the museum.

Down-river, on the bridge, a group of Japanese tourists were posing for pictures with this strange, angelic creature in the background. The hem of her water-soaked dress trailed behind her like a tail. A pair of currawongs eyed her briefly from the opposite bank, and then continued to scavenge through the crumbs of the tourists. One by one the picture-takers moved off the bridge and were replaced by an older couple, carrying small, identical backpacks and clasping hands. They gazed up-river and seemed at first not to notice the angel, who stood as still as a bird.

He didn't see her again until several months later. It was November, he'd been consumed with exams and working too many shifts at the restaurant which became busier with each passing week. He was aware that the campaign in the Weld was continuing and he'd heard of the plans to blockade the access road to the Air-Walk, but for the time being he'd had to ignore the emails.

The angel appeared on the front page of the Monday papers, blocking the road on a tripod, suspended several metres above the ground. Forestry and the local police had joined forces to recover lost revenue and what the police-minister called reparations for time-wasting, an action that was widely criticised as political and subsequently dropped, but the story caused enough of a stir to bring the angel, and the Weld, back into the headlines.

The road she blocked was lined with a veil of spindly, grey-green saplings. She clung to the poles that carried her weight in such a way that she appeared to be half hovering in mid-air, and half imprisoned by their spears. The tips of her raised wings were black and grey, as though darkened by rain and the mud of the forest floor. The serenity that he'd thought he had seen on her face when she stood in the river had gone. On the ground, at the base of the tripod, two

activists stretched a banner across the road, but below the angel the words seemed to him to be superfluous, a distraction.

For a long time, he carried this image with him in his head. He learned her name, but it wasn't important. She described herself as an artist. The legal actions caught her up in a flurry of media attention. She was photographed and interviewed, as though the young woman who spoke was the same creature as the angel with its heavy wings and painted neck, as though they were interchangeable. She spoke with passion and conviction. Her opponents condemned her as pretty, though naïve. They didn't notice the strength of her wings.

That summer, although he felt as strongly as ever about their protection, he found himself drifting away from the movement, and spending more and more time in the forests alone. At home he rarely crossed paths with Therese. Occasionally he took Leo on walks along the foreshore of the river, out across the mud-banks on the lowest tides. Although money was tight, he cut his shifts at the restaurant by half so he could spend most of the week away in the bush. He thought about the angel with uneasy desire.

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The valley was bordered on all sides by mountains. Where he pitched his tent, on the dry ground above the river Styx, the forest stood tall and silent. On a drizzling winter day several years before, he'd walked down a logging road not far from there with several thousand others, and gathered among stands of swamp gum towering eighty metres above the ground. Even now, the moratorium that had temporarily protected the area where he camped was coming to an end, and further up river, where the roads were, the earth was exposed in bulldozed wounds.

He had set up his camp in a clearing fringed by several gnarled myrtles, which formed an understorey far below the canopy of the gums. Covered with ferns and mosses, their fallen leaves formed a soft, rust-coloured carpet around the tent. Among them, silver-green leatherwood dropped large, milky flowers onto a bank of hard-water ferns. The air smelt of nectar and the old damp soil.

He woke at dawn as a shaft of low light spilled across the tent. Still in his sleeping bag, he sat



up and pushed his pack away from the entrance by his feet, and unzipped the mesh door and the fly which was saturated with dew. Squinting, he felt the sunlight and cold air across his face. His breath turned to cloud. Above him in the treetops, groups of currawongs and small, yellow-throated birds were singing in sporadic bursts, and higher up, as his eyes adjusted to the light, he saw the silhouette of a large bird that seemed to be watching his movements. It sat motionless, with its dark head bowed low in his direction. Without averting his eyes, Joe fumbled in his bag for the binoculars stowed at the bottom of his pack. Twisting awkwardly in the sleeping bag, he caused the tent to shudder. The water that had pooled on the roof through the night slid down across the fly, catching and reflecting the light of the sun, and causing the bird – perhaps a falcon, or an eagle – to lift and disappear into the waiting trees.

After breakfast, to get out of the strengthening wind, he followed an animal track through waist-tall ferns, towards a creek-bed and the shelter of a dolerite ridge. When he reached the stream he took off his boots and sat on the bank in a triangle of sun. He pulled his black, leather-bound notebook out of the pocket of his daypack, then balancing it on the rock by his side, crouched over the stream and splashed the icy water across his face. The cold on his skin made his temples ache. He looked at the notebook. Already a trail of reddish-brown ants had navigated its faded spine. He stepped into the cold of the water which altered its course around his ankles and continued to flow.

That night he was visited by the angel in a dream. He had woken to the sound of the warm wind roaring ocean-like through the canopy above. The tent shuddered and stretched taut through each gust. In the moonlight he could see the silhouettes of leaves and debris from the forest floor lash across the fly. The air was hot, and in the down bag his forehead and chest were beaded with sweat. Pushing it to his feet, he rummaged in the dark for one of the bottles of river-water he'd collected during the morning. He could remember considering getting up out of the tent to lie outside and feel the movement of air, but instead he supposed he'd fallen back onto the bedroll and into a fitful sleep.

When he opened his eyes, she was crouched above him with her wings arched as though for flight. The air smelt of earth and stale meat. His eyes stung with sweat and light. Her neck, as it had been when he'd seen her in the river, was silver-white. But instead of the dust-like powder he had expected, close up he could see the translucent skin was sewn with tiny damp feathers. Her face, which radiated heat, was smooth and flawless, like a curved, white egg.

Leaning forward across his body (and he wondered then if he were still in his tent, or in some higher, lonely place, her wings obscuring the sky and stars) she reached out one long arm and touched his cheek. Her expression was hard, determined; her dark eyes black.

When he woke, the wind had dropped. He made coffee in the Trangia with the honey-coloured water, and ate a breakfast of corn-crackers smeared with jam. The dream stayed with him as he sat by the tent and drank the hot, slightly bitter caffeine. It ran through his head as he shook out his boots, and put the notebook he'd intended to fill with words, unused, back into the hood of his pack. The restless night, the walking, and the previous day's heat, had left him vague and depleted. He had made no plans for the days ahead, and sat looking down at the sugar-ants collecting the crumbs from around the ferns at his feet. There, half-hidden in the foliage by his boot, the shaft of a long and perfect feather lay among the leaves.

Each new feather was different from the last. Over time his eyes became adept at picking out their lines among the shapes on the forest floor. In the ash on the edge of a baited coupe, he found the yellow tail feathers of a black cockatoo, and filled his pockets with handfuls of greasy down from a bird of prey's abandoned nest. As the light waned, he pulled the body of a scrub bird from the bracken, its flesh torn away by the devils and quolls he'd heard outside his tent at night. Crouching over the river, he washed the blood from its wing and threaded the feathers through a tear in his shirt.

Into the curved, smooth-vaned quill of the eagle, which extended the length of his outstretched arm, he wove the mottled tail-feathers of a boobook owl, and the cobalt, rain-soaked feathers of a wren. Under a nest, still holding a fractured egg – a cup of moss, bound with cobweb and fringed with stolen lichen – he found a layer of rose-coloured feathers. These he wove through the base of the wing, binding them tight to the translucent shafts with the fibres he'd pulled from the neck of his pack.

He worked on the wings with a focus so intense that the day he'd planned to return to the city arrived and departed un-noticed. He grew accustomed to the sensation of oil against his skin, and the damp weight of the feathers. At night, he dragged the wings with him into the tent, and lay with them folded by the pack at his feet. He ate little, and when he slept he dreamt of a place where the trees sank grey and still into the soil, where there was no sound, or colour, and he woke often, shivering with cold or drenched in sweat. With the wings in his hands some part of him longed to vanish into that threatened place. He closed his eyes, and thought of the devil pup he'd held in his arms at the museum, of all the actions he'd been to, and the marches, and

all the impassioned words he'd failed to write. He pictured the angel, alone on the river, and began to bind the wings to his back.

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*He is balanced on a precipice, high above the forest. Across the valley, slightly higher than the escarpment where he sits, a pair of eagles circle a treeless crag. As the wind gusts, deflected upwards by the cliff-face, their wings narrow to razor points, then deftly re-open for lift through each lull. Noticing him, the great birds widen the span of each circumference, so with each new flight they pass closer to the outcrop of rock where he sits. The wind strengthens. As the low clouds lift he's briefly blinded by the sun. The eagles dive. He feels the first sharp beak tear through the feathers he has bound across his shoulder, and the second penetrate the skin below. The blows are intense enough to knock him to his side. He has to dig his fingers into a groove in the rock to keep himself from falling.*

*The birds vanish as rapidly as they appeared. After several minutes, he sees them rise above the ridgeline of the mountain across the gully, and they circle the crag as they had done before, as if they had never dived, as if he wasn't there, although he knows that from time to time they cast a glance in his direction.*

*The cut on his shoulder is bleeding, not profusely, not dangerously so, but enough for the feathers of his upper wing to stain black and red with the blood. It's cold, and he pulls his wings close to his body like a cloak. They smell musty, they scratch against his skin, they tickle him, they are as soft as fur. In the west, the sun lowers onto the razor-back ridge of the Arthurs. Streams of low cloud settle through the canyons and green river valleys below.*

## Cloud Polishing

‘If we lie here all day, until the earth turns its back on the sun and the sky fills with stars and with rivers of cloud, we’ll find a way to change this world.’ He raises himself up onto his elbows, and looks down into her oval face and her eyes staring up at the glaze of sky and she lies so perfectly still that he can barely see her moving. He can barely see the rise of her chest as she breathes.

‘Where are you?’ He brushes a blade of grass from her bare arm. ‘Sometimes you look so distant that I feel...Almost like a child...Left behind.’ On the edge of his vision he sees a black cockatoo lift and fly out of a stand of white-skinned eucalypts. Without turning his head, he watches the large bird rise across the sky and hears its wings beat and it calls out with that lonely, haunting call they have. He thinks of the people who wove stories from those crying birds, of all the words they spoke and how they disappeared, they loved, and bled. ‘If only we could fly.’

‘If only I could read your mind.’ She’s breathing now, and flesh, and live. He moves his fingers into hers and wants to tell her everything, to peel back clouds and sky and show her all he’s seen and known and all he’ll be and taste. ‘If you could fly, where would you go?’

‘When I focus my eyes in a certain way, I see violet light and ceaseless waves of insects. More beetles than stars....’ She lowers her eyes and turns to him, his profile is framed by ripples of grass in a thousand shades of gold and grey. ‘Perhaps I would stay here’ she says. ‘Become someone different... Become someone better...’

‘We could build a shack out there on that headland,’ he gestures, ‘and let the rain, and the bracken, and the sand-storms blow in. And all the days will come and pass as they should, without guilt, without time.’

‘We’ll melt into languor. Spend our days on cloud-polishing – sloth-delirium – salt-skinned from swimming, sleep-filled –’

‘And you can write music. We’ll live in a lighthouse and listen for whale song...’

‘And grow old and sage.’

In the distance, the ocean wells onto a white and granite beach. They hear the waves fall, and imagine their footprints dissolved by the tongue of the sea, the wet beads of kelp that line the tidal beds like jewels. The light grows elliptical. For the first time he notices movement in the copse of trees, the rustle of grass.

He feels old.

‘In the city, you’ll become what you can be, what you’re supposed to be. You’ll fall in love and work and forget this it’s such a fucking cliché... and I’ll forget as well.’

She stares up beyond the canopy of leaves that fringe the pallid sky, and there, in the furthest limits of her vision, she sees a faint star, and the palest constellation forms. Somewhere the scent of wood-smoke clings to atoms and she wonders if they’ll sleep tonight, and counts the hours, and whispers now, ‘and I’ll become as famous, and as perfect as the moon.’

He lifts his body up again and rolls over, propping himself up on his elbows, so all he sees is earth, and her face watching his. Parting the roots of the grass, he digs his hand into the earth and gathers soil in his fingers, and then raising his arm lets it fall through his grasp in one slow movement, like a stream, into the coracle of her hand.

## Seeds

### Dormancy

*Designed for camouflage or attraction, to scatter, travel great distances, or remain in close proximity to a parent plant, the architecture of the seed is remarkably diverse. Seeds or spores can be narrow or flat, enclosed in pliant, leaf-like pods or adorned with feathery haloes for movement and flight. With coats that are elaborately textured, smooth and un-marked, or secretly patterned, they can be heavy, like the coconut - wrapped in a husk - or alighted with wings and tufts of wiry hair. Though the dust-like seeds of an orchid weigh as little as one millionth of a gram, the largest of seeds, encased inside the fruit of the coco de mer on the islands of the Seychelles, and to which a vast and watery mythology is attached, can rival the weight of a gangly child.*

*During maturation, plant seeds may enter a period of quiescence in response to adverse growing conditions, such as desiccation, bad weather, an absence of transient herbivores, or competition from neighbouring plants for nutrients and light. In certain cases, seeds will not germinate even when the necessary conditions required for growth are satisfied, a phenomenon referred to as seed dormancy. Dormancy in seeds can last for periods of weeks or even years. It is not unheard of for seeds to lie inert in the soil for many decades prior to germination. The condition, which can be mistaken for lifelessness, is more accurately equated to a state of hibernation, or prolonged sleep.*

It was during the months after William's death that her memories began to leave. In the beginning, she'd deliberately locked them away, in an attempt to distract herself from the intensity of grieving. Over a period of weeks she'd stowed away the laughter of her children in cardboard boxes, and hid his singing – quavers tossed into a sack – in a hollow of the clay above the slow-moving stream. During nights when the bodies of locusts lay inches deep across

the porch, a sea of twitching legs and trembling wings, she'd sat on the edge of her bed surrounded by stories of numerous textures and forms. Some recollections were awkward and misshapen – all angles and corners she had to flatten out or file down in order to fold into suitable cases. Others were more pliant and easily coded by colour, or according to lightness and weight. In the heat of the day she'd packed their summers, with his letters, in a shipping crate in the loneliest corner of the shed, and wedged a suitcase of Saturdays deep into the roots of the fig at the end of the quartz-gravel road. In a corner of her room under the windowsill – where the light from the moon was exquisitely clear – she'd found an hour, like a tapestry of glittering silk, woven through the rarest, most delicate cloth. Without unfolding it, before packing it away she allowed herself, for the briefest moment, to feel its weightlessness resting on her upturned palm.

For a short time she'd felt strangely exhilarated by the apparent success of her plan, and the process of salting away her past became a consuming, as well as comforting act. Her memories cast aside like a shed skin, she had moved through the house with an odd and, in the eyes of her daughters who'd stayed with her through those weeks, disconcerting vigour. But soon, despite her initial control, her elderly mind became accustomed to forgetting. One by one, the memories she'd at first pushed away had slipped, involuntarily, out of her grasp. She sat bereft by the creek as they tacked round the rocks in flotillas of paper-sailed, walnut-shell boats, and watched as they clung to the grey wings of swifts on the dying rays of sun. Without her memories, she found there was no reason to move beyond the kitchen during the morning. Her evenings stagnated, the long nights dragged, and a day came when she realised with dull regret that she could no longer hear the rhythms and the cadences of her husband's voice, or speak the Celtic name of the village where they'd made their first, imperfect home. The hours closed in around her like soil.

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On the morning he came, she'd been standing for some time at the sink in her high-ceilinged kitchen, filling a pot with stale leaves of a once aromatic tea. The day was still silent. She hadn't yet turned on the portable radio that usually accompanied her passage through the house, and when some sound caused her to glance up from the tea and look out through the window before her, she could see the mountains above the farm still hid behind a white invisibility of cloud. For days that she could no longer count, these mists had crept weightless, like sleep, across the ranges. As they passed, the once emerald mountains had faded to shades of a murky

khaki. They took with them the forests of tall mountain ash. The silver-leaved canopies of wattles dissolved one by one into damp, disinterested sky.

The property drowsed over the foothills of these mountains. It was a region renowned for its gullies and cloud. The air was infused with eucalypt sap. There was a small farm, its principal crop an old orchard once bright with apples and pears. Behind the house, a grey garden drifted in and out of the blanket of fog.

She took a cup the colour of egg-shell from the shelves at her shoulder, and placing it on the table next to the chipped ceramic pot, settled herself in her usual chair. Outside, above the ridgeline, the faint sun mooched its orbit through the northern sky. The fog pressed lightly on the window's glass.

‘Sorry to disturb you.’ The stranger standing before her on the porch had a boyish, cherubically rounded face, which glistened slightly with the clamminess of the air. A young man, and tall, he smiled in an unassuming way. ‘I’m Olwyn,’ he said. Olwyn Sparrow.’ His voice, low and melodious, had the same beguiling quality as his smile. It was inflected with an accent that, though oddly familiar, she found difficult to place.

‘I’m a gardener. ...’ he continued, shifting his weight from foot to foot as though rehearsing a sombre dance. As he swayed, the back of his head brushed against the wisteria that dangled from the lattice above. The curls of his hair seemed willingly to catch and entwine with its outstretched tendrils. She watched them lengthen, and recoil, as he moved.

‘I heard in town that you may be wanting some work done around your property?’ He looked at her intently. He was dressed, lightly for the weather, in shades of sturdy, olive-green cotton, his brown hands pushed carelessly into the pockets of his jeans. In the past, as he spoke she might have noticed the lines that formed around his eyes, like a contoured map, at the moments when he smiled, or how the hair that clung like damp leaves to his forehead was feathered with grey at the nape of his neck.

‘I’m sorry for turning up out of the blue.’ He pulled an envelope out of the back-pack that was slung across his shoulder. His hair was the colour of rain-soaked bark. ‘I have these references, from other work I’ve done... if that’ll help?’

More from a vague sense of what was polite than from interest or concern, she took them from him, turning over each envelope unopened and unread, as though trying to determine their contents through some act of concentration. Her hands were like fine, un-feathered birds.



They stood in silence as the mist passed across the porch and lingered beside her in the hall like an eager, though uninvited guest.

‘I won’t be able to pay you.’ She spoke quietly, frequently clearing her throat. ‘But you can stay in the shearers’ hut if you like. I’m not really sure that there’s anything to do...’ They walked together through the garden, pausing briefly as she pointed out the various sheds and the fittings for the hoses. A pair of bare oaks arched indolently over the open space at the front of the house. In their shadow they passed through a gravelled ring of wiry, un-pruned roses. Beyond them, stone paths led into the fog and through the trees.

At the hut inside the northern gate, a small shearers’ quarters with an air of neglect, she hesitated for a moment before unlocking the door. Behind her, a single, shivering pear looked forlornly across the fence towards the leafless orchard, like a regretful escapee. Inside, beside a fire-place set into the lime-washed wall, there was a free-standing sink and a single bed covered with a faded, sun-wrinkled quilt.

As she crossed the room some impulse caused her to pause and glance at her reflection in a mirror embossed with tiny ships. The figure staring out from among the sails was crumpled and slight. The apron she wore out of habit was gathered at the waist by its doubled ties, the bodice hanging loose across her breast. The face in the mirror looked back at her with wide-set and unrecognising eyes. Small, and shaped like a flattened heart, it was intricately wrinkled and imprinted with the folds of her pillow, creased across the flesh of her cheeks, and the delicate frames of the spectacles she’d left on the table at her bedside. At the top of her head, two knots of white hair were pinned like clipped, diaphanous wings.

Olwyn Sparrow watched as she brushed her hand across the cobwebbed surface of the windows, and ran a cloth over the mantelpiece in her slow, perfunctory way. Her name was Columbine, like the flower, and the dove-colour grey.

### Germination

*In order for a seed to germinate, certain environmental cues must be given. A dormant seed or embryo can wait for indefinite periods in the soil prior to successful germination. In the Yukon Valley, the seeds of an arctic lupine found in the frozen burrow of a lemming and potentially dating back 10 000 years, were germinated within hours of retrieval. While in many cases, it is necessary for the embryo to swell with sufficient water for the coat of the seed to split, the germination strategies of individual seeds tend to be dependent upon the ecologies of their*

*habitats.*

*Altering diurnal rhythms, fluctuations in soil temperature or acidity, moisture levels, heat, and even fire can serve to activate germination. In a process designed to broaden the scope of their dispersal, some pre-germination seeds must first pass through the intestines of an animal or bird. In the desert, seeds are activated only after their coats are leached away by rainfall, others are released mechanically by actions like tumbling along the bed of a stream. In forest plants, many seeds must wait for an opening in the canopy through disturbance, or the death of a neighbouring plant, before beginning their cycle of growth.*

On the upper side of the gravel road, which led in one direction to the local town, and in the other, out of the mountains towards the city on the coast, there was a catchment of un-tracked, open bush. Long ago, in those forests, stands of tall stringy bark and the straight-timbered ash were harvested with bullock teams and cross-cut saws. In the days when she and her children had walked the hillsides in search of old railway tunnels thick with ferns, and orange groves black and withered with age, there were moments when she'd thought she could still hear the whistling of timber-gangs from deep within the shaded trees. She'd learned to love, though never quite trust that whispering place.

Although in patches the dirt roads were freckled with the seed-heads of dandelions and milk-green thistles, and certain pieces of equipment which had been left out in the elements had fallen into disrepair, the property didn't appear to be abandoned, exactly. The gardens showed no signs of particular neglect, and they weren't what you'd call overgrown, but there was something missing. An air of ennui or listlessness seemed to hover over the garden. The buds of its few winter flowers were frail and dulled as if from weariness, or the dimness of the light. The foliage of evergreens and violets, nodding limply under boulders and ferns, appeared somehow drained of vitality and scent. It was the kind of country where, sensing a drop in pressure or the steady formation of rain-bearing cloud, vast flocks of black cockatoos once swooped down to occupy the valleys, descending into tree-tops and showering nuts and bark down onto the gravel roads. But, despite the richness of the forest that skirted its perimeters, few birds and fewer animals now moved among the grasses of this farm. Occasionally, he'd glimpse the tail of a mouse, or a feral cat slinking across a stretch of open ground, but even the lethargic huntsmen he uncovered in the woodpile seemed to slumber through peculiar hibernation. The overall effect of the property was one of an eerie botanical inertia. It brought to mind the relics of a petrified wood, where ancient trees had transformed into stone, or the flora of a sea-bed, which had been calcified into skeletons of blanched, arboreal coral. The air was still and morbidly cold. No birds sang or flew into the trees.

On that first night, they sat in her kitchen after they'd eaten, listening to the radio as the garden grew dark. Columbine sat still and silent, wrapped in concentrated quiet. Rather than attempting conversation, as he drank his tea he let his eyes wander around the room and through the photographs cluttered on the mantelpiece – signs that the somnolent house had once vibrated with movement and life. Eclectically framed in silver and wood, the prints were largely black and white. The few that were in colour, in more modern frames, were yellowish from age and exposure to sun. Many of the older pictures had foreign, almost exotic backdrops. Among those which leant against the green plaster wall, were a hand-coloured close-up of a young soldier's face, and a group shot of several women leaning on the rail of a passenger ship, laughing and shielding their faces from light off the water and the camera's prying lens. Closest to where he sat, beside an empty vase, was a sepia-toned image of three children of varying ages. Dressed in plaid uniforms and clutching leather satchels, they were perched on the back of a small elephant, wearing an ornate, brass-trimmed bridle.

Olwyn Sparrow began by doing small, preparatory chores around the property. He split wattle for the fires and pulled out the lantana that crept towards the valley from the road. Even in the mist, he was certain he never saw Columbine move beyond the confines of the house. Sometimes when he worked close by he'd see her through a gap in the curtains or a half-open door. She sat with the radio beside her on the table, her white hands curled like a cat upon her lap. Because of nervousness or forgetfulness, he found it difficult to tell, she left her light on in her room at night; he saw her face, round like the moon in her window.

Gradually, the property was transformed by the new gardener's labour. The air was always damp with mulch, or pungent with the fumes of compost. He worked through the lengthening winter days and often late into the shortening nights. He planted bay trees with waxen leaves, a climbing rose and crooked pines which splayed their needles across the ground.

One long afternoon, he took the Morris out of the garage and returned with bags of seaweed matted with shell-grit, feathers and the finest sand. He spread it thick around the blueberry stems and shovelled it over the freesias. The smell of the ocean crept into the house. She pushed her chair into the doorway and watched him that day.

What began, began when the mornings were still cold, and the garden shimmered with ice and

frost. Olwyn was burning leaves below the poplars by the garage. Sinews of smoke ambled over the ground. For Columbine, inside the house, it seemed a morning no different from the mornings before. After finishing her tea, touching her fingers unconsciously to her hair, she stood at the sink and washed and dried the dishes one by one. On the radio, two male voices were discussing the vicissitudes of the climate:

‘The cumulus were coloured, like river-stones,’ said one.

‘*River-stones.*’ She found herself repeating the words as her gloved hands moved through the water in the sink. When she’d finished, and the china was back on the shelves, she dried her hands and walked over to the window, its pane opaque with condensation from the stove. Absently, she wiped the surface clear with the tea-towel she was still holding, and looked out into her garden.

Something had changed.

During the night, or in the few hours of morning before she woke, hundreds of crocuses had emerged from the soil, and scattered like the embers of a fire across the lawn. The solitary, cup-shaped flowers were shades of saffron, mauve and purple. Their petals, of polished regularity, were striated with white or flawlessly plain. On their grassy leaves beads of dew refracted the rays of the early morning light. Each flower seemed at once fragile and defiant, rising up out of the frozen earth.

With her hand still braced against the glass of the window, Columbine felt her skin turn as cold as ice. She realised she was shivering and closed her eyes, resisting the dizziness that stirred in her stomach. In that moment, hazy, sequential pictures began to pass, involuntarily, into her mind. Through the colours of the crocuses, which merged into one, she saw a vision of her own, younger, stronger hands, smoothing sheets across the surface of an iron-framed bed. An enamelled bowl, filled with aubergines in a triangle of light, became a crushed dress, dyed indigo with amaranth leaves, draped over a chair in a darkened hall. Each memory fused subtly with those it followed. As she opened her eyes, beyond the window, the lines of the trees formed new images then movement – as though a silent, grainy film were running haltingly through her head. Before long, as clear as the garden outside, another, darker, greener place, where diagonal light and a breeze cast rippling silhouettes across the face of an ivy-clad wall, had taken shape in her mind. It was a garden she knew.

On the outskirts of a village in the Cotswold hills, where a motorway now cleaved its way across the patchwork of fields, she’d spent her first years of marriage in the cottage of a great writer. It was there that she’d learned how to till through the soil and plant rows of asparagus

and narcissus bulbs that spread in streams of gold across the garden each May. The sky was smaller there, hemmed in by hedges and walls and the fickleness of the weather. She remembered the sound of the rain as it drummed on the panes of the windows in their attic room at night, and the earthen smell of the thatch on the roof, drying like wheat in the afternoon sun. In that country of bees and lavender, where each scent and texture could map out her past, she'd thought she seen her future, in patterns of water and shade, stretching out before her. One midnight, in the mustiest bedroom of the house, their first child was born into the violet-coloured air. They named him Benjamin, after his beloved, wayward uncle. He was stout-limbed and ruby-faced, a child of strength and colour. But still, though exhausted, she'd held him in her arms for as long as she could after feeding him each night, unable to bear the fragility of his tiny, swaddled body, unwilling to let him lay alone in his cot.

During those first months, both she and her new son had laughed and cried with the readiness of the rain. Every stray word, caress and discontent was etched into the floorboards, and sown through the seedbeds of that Arcadian place. She could picture the walls of their cramped room, papered with blue damask lilies and the stains of rising damp. William had come home with letters from her parents, and close-by, on the common, the first crocuses grew, and the ice on the lake where they'd skated through the winter was beginning to melt and crack.

## Growth

*Prior to germination, and often coinciding with periods of quiescence, seeds undergo varying processes of dispersal in order to seek out their optimum conditions for growth. A seed's migration could be the fall to the forest floor from the canopy of a eucalypt, it could be a migration on the wind, or over water, or in the gut or on the back of an animal or bird. Seeds with wings or tiny hairs such as dandelions, milkweed or poplar are designed for wind dispersal and can cover great distances. Others are encased in fleshy fruits for animal ingestion, or attach barbs or hooks to feathers and fur. Some plants produce buoyant sea-beans or drift seeds for dispersal in rivers and over seas.*

*When dispersal is complete, and germination is achieved, the structural growth of the plant can begin. While the bulk of their solid material is derived from the atmosphere through photosynthesis, nitrogen, phosphorous, water and other nutrients are primarily drawn from the soil. Rates of growth are highly variable, and are dependent on both the characteristics of the particular plant and the conditions in which it is grown. In cold climate forests there are types*

*of moss which grow merely a fraction of a millimetre in the space of an hour, while given warm and humid conditions, certain vines can add as much as an arm's length of tissue in a single day of growth.*

Slowly, the garden began to wake. Inside the house, though Columbine continued to sit with the radio in her kitchen, now and then she glanced out through the window to where Olwyn worked, un-binding the branches of an espaliered pear, or forking bluestone and lime into the earth around the trees. She thought of the windless night during the empty weeks after the funeral, when visitors had stopped coming into the house, and the last of the paper-work was done. She'd stood before the bathroom mirror soaking her hands in olive oil and warm-water in the sink, and eased her wedding ring from her swollen finger. Along with her strings of black-pearls and a butterfly broach, she'd carefully dried and wrapped the band of silver in layers of tissue. In the garden, under the oaks, she'd hollowed out a bed in the leaf-litter and the soil with the fork of a rake, and buried her wedding ring there in the earth where the crocuses now grew.

Behind the cottage, the property sloped down through the forest into a valley of ferns, where a tannin-stained stream, knitted with roots, had broken its banks in the winter floods. On the level ground above the creek there were fallen gums and old stumps, some several metres in diameter, covered with moss and parasitic ferns and rotting into the porous earth. There in the cool he dug camellias and rhododendrons into the soil among the saplings. Over time they formed a humid bower and lifted their leaves to catch the rain. They were hardy, resisting the mountain frosts that still occasionally settled. Buds formed - crimson, scarlet, white - they shone through the forest like monstrous jewels.

When the mist had lifted and the last of the crocuses had begun to decompose, Olwyn Sparrow cut the stems of the camellia's most lustrous, opulent flowers. Columbine let them stand among a bunch of withered daisies in a milk jug in the kitchen. They shed their petals on the table-cloth like beaded drops of wine, or blood.

After dinner, when he'd left her alone and she sat with the company of the radio and the fire, on a whim Columbine drew the flowers from their vase and let them lie across her lap. Other than the slightly rancid smell of the stagnant water on their lower leaves and stems, they had no noticeable scent, but the moisture soaked into the wool of her skirt, and their colours seemed to intensify in the half-light of the fire.

She took off her glasses and wrapped them in a handkerchief. Though her eyes were tired for a long time she sat and stared at the flowers in her lap. In the heat of the fire their sail-like petals fell onto her knees and across the floor. As she turned to examine the flowers in the vase, she became aware that, at the edge of her vision, the fallen petals had begun to blur. She watched as their bold colours ran and deepened into shades of an earthen, hennaed red, and slowly, though with more insistence than the verdant world the crocuses had revealed, a country of poverty and light began to crystallise, complete and perfect, in her head.

After the quiet of the Cotswolds, William, a policeman, had received a posting to a hill-station in India, as an officer of the Raj. They'd been married only three years when they travelled to Naini, to a house by a deep lake – green like the eye of a goddess – where life, change, death hit her smack in the face and she felt alternately sage and small.

In the hills there, rhododendrons grew glossy and tall. After school, and on days when the sky would lower and turn the waters of the lake into ink, her children would vanish into those groves of trees for hours. She remembered her daughter, with her willowy hands and cotton-print dresses, reading books in the furthest, darkest corners of the forest. When the monsoon came, the streets were sometimes ankle-deep in water. Pools of rain collected in the bottomless flowers. Mists sank low over the lake and the house.

On the morning they'd arrived at the bus depot in Naini, after a two hour drive from Kathgodam through the foothills of the Himalaya, on a winding, filament of road carved into the rock-face of the cliffs, she'd stood outside the station clutching her wriggling child against her over-dressed and sweating hip. In search of a taxi, William had left her alone with their assortment of homesick cases. A vast, cavernous banyan arched across the main road into the town. Beside her, a young man crippled with leprosy begged in Urdu for spare rupees, and a group of children, giggling and squealing, took turns to grab at the fabric of her London-cut skirt. On the road, before another British couple – who had accompanied them on the train from Bombay and whose faces were taut with pride and fear – a stunted, elderly woman held open a shallow, lidded basket. Inside, she saw the hooded head of a coiled, sleeping snake. Until William returned she'd kept her eyes fixed upon the foliage of the luxurious fig.

Four of their children were born in that country, including a set of tiny twins. She remembered their garden, a terraced slope thick with magnolia and mulberry trees. Searching for shade in the heat of the day, she'd planted raised beds of berries and layered straw to cool the steaming earth. It was an attempt at connection, or some sense of continuity in that breathless, foreign

place.

## Inflorescence

*A flower, at times referred to as a blossom or bloom, contains the reproductive organs of the flowering plant, with its primary function being the union of one plant with another through the transfer of pollen. This process, beginning with pollination, is ensued by fertilisation, and culminates in the development and distributing of the seeds.*

*The nectar glands, colour, shape, and scent of flowers are each carefully designed to alert and attract potential pollinators. Many plants rely solely on the wind for the dispersal of pollen. Other plants depend upon insects and animals to achieve such transfers, with flowers that are insect-pollinated described as 'entomophilous,' or, literally, 'insect-loving.' In certain flowers, species of birds, pigmy possums and gliders can be utilised for pollination. The flowers of particular orchids are designed to resemble female bees, in order to lure in the males of the species seeking out a mate. As both bees and birds have colour-vision, they are attracted to brightly coloured blooms. Pollinators in search of nectar may be directed by patterns or nectar guides on petals. Often such guides are only discernible through ultraviolet light, which is perceptible to bees and certain insects, but invisible to the human eye.*

*While many flowers produce pollinator-attracting scents which are sweet and pleasant to our sense of smell, and are often utilised or mimicked in perfume, others have flowers that are pollinated by flies and imitate the stench of decomposing meat.*

*Blossoms that are pollinated by night creatures, most commonly bats and moths, have a tendency to focus not on colour, but on scent, which has the benefit of continuing to attract potential pollinators even after dark. Such flowers are generally colourless, or white.*

She couldn't say how long he stayed there, in her garden, if it were less than months, or more than years. Before he came, the days had grown stale and unchanging, mornings stretched out into evenings and nights; the seasons seemed to falter. But he showed her the fossils in the free stone wall, the way an orchid could unfold and shrivel in the space of a single hour. Time seemed to waver, become supple and capricious. Small trees grew into maturity in a day; a snail took a year to cross the handle of a bucket.



Time passed, in its mercurial way. Olwyn Sparrow hung a light like the moon among the branches of a wattle, and the night air quivered with beetles and moths. For the first time since the night when she'd buried her ring, Columbine left the house and walked out into the dusk. A faint breeze made the jonquils sigh and the canopy of oaks above her murmur and wink. She moved through her once familiar garden with the unsteadiness of a just-walking child. At first, pulling her coat around her neck, she walked with the fingers of her left hand touching the cracked weather-board of the kitchen wall. She had forgotten the wind, and the feeling of air as it moved across her skin.

Against the eastern face of the house where the jasmine climbed high into the guttering, and the soil bed extended beyond the wall as though longing to descend onto the damp valley floor, she found a narrow-leaved tree with flowers like stars. Stepping out from the wall, she picked one single flower and held it out at arm's length before her. It smelt of honey and earth, and in the light of dusk its beauty seemed to eclipse the rest of the garden.

In India, after Partition, they'd travelled by train to the ancient Bombay ports, with their lives and their home crammed into boxes and bags. She remembered it was the month of Diwali, festival of light. They had crowded on the deck of the ship in the heat as it pulled away from the port, and watched the myriad lanterns and lights on the shore recede into the darkness. Incense, dust and light faded into the cool of the waiting ocean. Light, after light, after light.

When they reached Australia, she'd stood on the wharf in Port-Melbourne and watched as the workers let her crates of crystal and china drop down onto the dock. When she'd opened them in her new kitchen in an outer-Melbourne suburb, there was nothing left but fragments and shards. She'd pieced together a life in this new hemisphere.

It was here, in these hills, that she'd watched her children grow up, marry, have children of their own. She'd watched her husband, many years older than herself, grow old. There was a morning, etched in her memory, which she'd been unable to forget. She'd woken early; yellow-tailed black cockatoos were stripping the bark from the wattles outside their room. The bed beside her was empty, the single sheet they'd slept under pushed onto the floor. There was nothing particularly unusual in this, William often walked in the early morning, if Pat had barked persistently at the window, when lorikeets settled noisily through the trees. But something in the way the warm wind caught the open front door, slamming it intermittently against the doorstep in the hall, instilled her with a sense of omen.

She had known of course, in some recoiled, reluctant way, she was losing him. Her daughter,

who had visited only days before, had noticed how forgetful and withdrawn he'd become.

'What if there's a time,' Margo had asked, when William was out on the veranda with the paper, smoothing the tablecloth for lunch as she spoke in her most tender, even motherly way, 'when you can't look after him anymore? You know if it's necessary we can find him a place in a home, in Melbourne, or Dandenong if you'd prefer?' She remembered that at the time she'd let the question go unanswered, and had continued tossing the salad intently, avoiding meeting her daughter's eyes. Margo, moving a chair from the hall into the kitchen, hadn't pushed, and after glancing briefly at her mother as she rummaged through the cutlery draws, had gone outside to call the children in from the garden for lunch.

On that morning, the dawn had been hot and grey. Still in her nightgown, with her feet bare, she'd walked towards the orchard, where the water in the dam lapped against a jetty which extended from the gravel bank. William was sitting on the edge of the grass, his knees tucked under his chin like a child, his bare arms wrapped around his doubled legs, supporting his head. Beside him, Pat sat with his chin lowered and resting on his outstretched paws. Although William didn't hear her, Pat, who would normally bark and jump up to greet her, raised his head and looked at her silently over the water as she approached. Even from across the dam she could see that her husband was shaking. He was sobbing in a way she had never seen him cry, his whole body shuddering, his fists clenched so tightly that the blood had drained from his fingers. For one eternal moment she had considered returning, unseen, to her bed.

The garden had been a source of comfort to both of them. All through those early years when they'd sold stone-fruit from the orchard to Italian vendors at the markets in the city, they'd tended it with energetic diligence. In the kinder, more temperate climate of the ranges, they didn't experience the same kinds of drought that periodically gripped the western plains. She found that, with care, they could sow the seeds of other worlds within the perimeters of the farm. At that time, she'd had no notion of invasive species or noxious weeds, and though in later years she'd been careful to avoid planting the fox-gloves and other plants that multiplied and flourished beyond the fences and into the forest, it was a concept that she was never sure she fully understood. Not long after arriving in Melbourne, she'd walked on Swanston Street by the Yarra, in the sun, and compared her children with their pink-skinned knees and ginger hair to the burned-brown and salt-bleached Australians on the street, who seemed to move in a surer, more languid way.

There were days, in both India and Australia, when she'd felt she couldn't face another day of unbroken blue sky. At the farm, when there seemed to be no respite from the oppressive heat, she'd dreamt of new snow and the sting of the cold on her cheeks.

Her garden had let her be silent, plough through its earth, and scream without judgement. She loved the way it yielded to her fingers, but resisted the force of the spade. William had planted roses, in the stately, deliberate fashion of England. He cursed the possums who chewed at their buds. The children spent hour after hour turning purple in the tunnels of the loganberry patch, which was often infested with rats and snakes. They came into the kitchen with half-empty buckets, swollen stomachs, and their fingers and faces stained black with the juice.

## Fruit

*After pollination, the fertilised ovary of the flowering plant begins to ripen into fruit. While the ovule continues to transform into a seed, the ovarian lining of the flower can grow into the soft flesh of a fruit, or form the hard outer shell of a nut. The sugary flesh of fruit is designed to appeal to the taste-buds of animals, with the ingested seeds transported in the gut, and excreted some distance from the original plant. In the same way, the nutrient rich kernels of nuts are deliberately appealing to rats and squirrels, who secrete them under the soil in preparation for the winter months, allowing uneaten seeds to develop in different and potentially advantageous conditions. Conversely, the fruits of the cocklebur and unicorn plant have skins that are coated with spines or barbs to prohibit ingestion by animals, snagging instead upon feathers or fur, in order to facilitate dispersal.*

*Certain fruits feature evolutionary mechanisms to aid their movement via wind. The fruit of maple and elm trees are naturally elongated and flattened like wings or helicopter blades; others, such as salsify, have tiny parachutes for travel. Coconuts may drift over the surfaces of oceans in order to broadly distribute their seed.*

There was an orange on her doorstep. She peeled it, sliced it and pulled apart the flesh as she'd done a thousand times before. The juice ran down her wrist and stung a paper cut on her palm. Each segment of fruit, ripe with seeds, was sealed inside a transparent skin and tied with filaments of bitter pith.

Her daughter Alice had once fallen in love with an orange silk dress. Despite her mother's nagging, she wore it in the garden, playing cricket with her brothers, climbing trees and baking cakes, swinging on a worn-out tyre. It was given to her by their neighbour, a lonely woman whose adult children had all left home. She brought a box full of bohemian clothes into Columbine's kitchen one morning when both Alice and Margo were in. Rummaging through

the fabric, their eyes fell immediately and simultaneously on the orange dress. There was an argument that ended in tears, but was appeased by a mini-skirt of pale blue wool.

She'd never really noticed the colour of that sundress, until her daughter wore it on a first date with an American boy from the city. She remembered they'd heard his ute pull up outside the house in darkness, and the sound of the horn as he turned in the driveway and drove back towards the town. Alice came in alone across the porch. She hadn't bothered to reach for the switch of the light as she let herself in. In the kitchen, Columbine glanced up from the paper and saw her close the door behind her, then pause. She was standing with her back against the door-frame in the hallway, the light of the moon across her face from the window, and she was shining, her daughter in her orange dress.

Summer beat down upon the garden. Lightning ringed the horizon with fire. Coral trees flowered in the corners of the orchard, in shades of orange and vivid red. Orange – like sunlight and the paws of a tiger, like the persimmons, loquats, and mandarins that had flourished in their Australian garden. In India, mangoes and papaya had thrived. Too many to eat or to give away, they rotted and fermented in crates below the trees.

'Mangoes taste like seduction...' William told her, 'papaya like the end of the world.' She thought of the mid-summer afternoons when in the heat of India they'd had the luxury of sleep. She remembered the way the shadows washed across the skin of his back like water. As they drowsed, they heard the sounds of people moving outside – the children playing in the garden, their ayah washing dishes or preparing tea – rare, delicious moments of sleeping, as sweet as stolen apples.

Birds and creatures came into the garden. In the mountains, blue-gums and cinnamon wattles were freckled with bright flocks of rosellas and galahs. Purple jacaranda, which strayed beyond the fringes of the nearby towns, turned black with the feathers of currawongs and ravens; glazed beaks and yellow eyes flashed among the lilac buds. In the garden, groups of dark-eyed corellas with lumbering walks and eerie calls squabbled in the branches of the fig trees at dusk. Occasionally, a peregrine falcon would dart out of the eucalypts behind the dam, swooping through the settling birds so they rose in great chaotic clouds. In the darkness, a pair of boobook owls built their nest in the eaves of the garage. Swamp wallabies foraged on the forest floor. Nocturnal brush-tails and gliders sought out the ambrosia nectar of waratah flowers.

Through these days, Columbine began to notice the wisteria thicken and stretch into the woodwork of the house. Behind the kitchen sink, moss and beds of violets appeared in the shadows. Duckweed floated on the surface of the bath; fungi grew in clusters in the cupboard in the hall. When the rain came, the humidity carried the aroma of the daphne through the windows of the kitchen. It hovered, like swarms of citrus-kneed bees in the air above the stairs.

When she was nineteen, she'd had a lover who'd studied Latin and Greek at an Edinburgh college. A musician, he'd seduced her with lyrics and fables; a universe of unfathomed literature and art had opened out before her. There was so much possibility then, and she'd loved this man in his book-lined room with the kind of hope you can only know once. He was a worthy first love, but restless. He'd unwittingly taken her heart, in pieces, on the evening that he left. The only son in a family of women, he was slender-limbs, lemon-trees and hand-written letters. She'd watched him play his guitar at night, his fingers light upon its strings, upon its neck.

Some evenings, at dusk, when the lights of the city flickered like eyes through the Leith River mists, they walked home from the library through the Bruntsfield links. One night, they'd seen a flame-red fox run over a bank of un-blemished snow. Elbow-shaped shadows and autumn leaves fell across the narrow path. Under a laurel tree they'd stopped as he'd traced out the lines of a crooked heart carved into the bark.

'Everything unfolds from a story,' he'd said. 'Even here in these gardens there are stories more ancient than any of this old city's churches or spires.'

She remembered the story he'd told her that night, and how later, in bed, he'd gripped her wrists until they hurt, as though afraid to let her go. The story was the Greek myth of Daphne and her transformation into a laurel tree, and it came back to her now with the clarity of the lemon-scented plant in her garden that bore Daphne's name.

'On the slopes of Mount Parnassus,' her lover had told her, 'in the glowing days after his victory over Python, the nymph Daphne became the youth Apollo's first, although unnatural, love.' Inspired by spite towards the boastful Apollo, Eros had struck each with the enchantments of his arrows. The first, for Apollo, induced insatiable love. The second, striking Daphne, repelled it.

She could still picture Daphne, pursued by Apollo to the banks of the river where her father was god. Weeping and pleading to Peneus for rescue, she'd felt her body stiffen and her feet take root as her long limbs hardened into branches. When Apollo had found her, alone on the bank, her skin was roughened to knotted bark, her face was the trunk of a laurel tree, her hair a mass

of moving leaves.

## Decay

*When a plant reaches the end of its life cycle, a sophisticated process of biological decomposition begins. In the initial stages of decay, a decomposing plant is often colonised by saprophytic fungi. Such fungi possess the ability to degrade the cellular structure of a plant, thus releasing more readily degradable material for other, often bacterial, decomposers.*

*The longevity or growth cycle of plant species is profoundly variable. Where the seed-to-seed cycle of an ephemeral species can take only a matter of weeks (summer annuals, for example, germinate, flower and wither within a single growing season), undisturbed, in the cool-temperate forests of Tasmania, the slow-growing Huon Pine can live for several thousand years.*

In the months before he left, Olwyn Sparrow began to disappear from the garden, for periods first of hours, and later, days. Occasionally she'd see him in the distance with a torch-light, following the ridgelines of the foothills through the dark, or zigzagging down the escarpment through the eucalypts, towards the roar of the flooding stream.

The rain lasted for intervals of days. All through the garden, pools and streams made mirrors of the paths below the water-logged trees. The torrent of the creek was loud enough now to be audible even from inside the house. At night, when the sound travelled further through the sunless air, Columbine lay awake in the dark, half expecting the water to flood under the door and wash away her blackwood bed. The smell of damp permeated the walls. In the humidity, millions of black ants carried the carcasses of cicadas across the mantel in the kitchen, dragging them, with almost mathematical precision, into the labyrinths they'd created in the floor. For Columbine the hours were fitful, filled with memories and dreams. Each one luminous, they shone like the eyes of cats through the shadows of the forest. A thousand scents, textures and sounds evoked each second of her discarded past.

She spoke to Margo on the phone one afternoon when the sun broke through the high black cloud. Her voice sounded close and clear above the wind and the scraping fingers of trees against the house.

The garden became a seething, pungent place. Soft fruit, swarming with European wasps, rotted on the trees and into the soil. Mosquito lava multiplied in stagnating pools, and small bats, with taut wings like transparent silk, flew restlessly through the open windows of her room.

She wasn't afraid when the wisteria writhed, like a python, through the lattice below the steps of the porch, or when the eucalypts, now tufted with herring-bone ferns, tunnelled their roots into the foundations of the house. In the front rooms they'd visibly lifted the floors, causing deep cracks, which soon filled with lichen and mould, to open up across the plaster of the ceiling.

Through the long days the gusts that swept down from the hills unlatched and flung open the fly-wire doors. One moonless night, she was woken from a dream by a possum crashing through the kitchen. In the wind, the curtains, of diaphanous gauze, billowed through the bedroom. Her cotton sheets lifted like sails above her bed. Downstairs, the possum pulled food from the cupboards and cowered in a corner as she lit up its eyes with the beam of her torch. She could hear it breathing. A dusting of weevil-ridden flour coated its paws and whiskers. Once she'd shooed it outside, she turned on a lamp and looked out of the window into the hemisphere of light. In the shivering leaves of the oaks she thought she saw her husband's laughing face.

On the morning he left, she woke to find her bedroom glistening with the tracks of snails. The light was low and golden. It streamed across Columbine's sleep-crumpled face, warming her cheeks and the lids of her eyes. She rolled over. Dozens of tiny winged insects were scattered across the sheets of the bed. Stretching out her arm to brush them away, she noticed a faint red glow across her skin, and turned her forearm towards the window's light. There, in the nook of her elbow, across the two blue veins that ran down to her wrists, a patch of lichen had attached itself to the softest skin. Instinctively, she rubbed her hand across the rough, reddish stain, but it remained there, as stubborn and hardy as if it were clinging to the face of any tree-trunk or rock. She looked more closely at the tiny plant. It was the same, fine red lichen that she'd seen so many times in the hills above her home. Flecked with white, the papery leaves were the colour of ochre, or desert soil, and the wrinkles that deepened in her skin when she moved formed ravines of a pale and delicate green.

For a long time, Columbine lay awake on the bed, gazing at the curve of her outstretched arm. She thought of Olwyn Sparrow, lay perfectly still and listened for some discernible sound of him working outside. On the dresser in the corner, a yellow moth fluttered against the mirror's glass, and silently, on the breeze, clouds of dandelion seeds blew through the open window. Their spurs dug like arrows into the tassels of the curtains, and wove their way into the fibres of the carpet and the chairs. Columbine stood and looked out into her queer, mercurial garden. Fine seeds and silver spores were knotted through her hair.



## The Skin of the Ocean

*In the months after he leaves her, after a cyclone hits the coast and rips the coral from the seabed on the outer islands, there is a long period of calm. It's hot. He sits up at night unable to sleep. One midnight, working on the yacht, he drops something precious over the side – a pocket knife with an ivory handle. He leans out and for a moment watches it sink, then dives from the stern, careful not to submerge it further with his body. There is a light current of bioluminescence running through the water. He catches glimpses of the sinking knife.*

*Despite the darkness, the water is clear. Above him the silhouette of the yacht looms like the belly of a shark. On the sea-bed, he sees what he thinks is the blade, wedged between two blanched heads of coral. Fumbling for the knife, he feels his fingers fall instead upon the curved, smooth face of a shell. He lets the last bubbles of oxygen escape from his lungs, and his body rise effortlessly to the surface.*

*Balancing the shell on the skirting rail of the yacht, he hauls himself back into the warmth of the night. On the deck, he turns it over in the lamp-light of the cabin. It's some kind of conch, in perfect condition. Still wet, it glistens in his hands like a jewel. Its beauty eclipses his desire for the knife. He feels a rush of familiar sensations – guilt, desire. He feels exhilarated, like a thief.*

From the first time he dived in the islands, Michael knew he wouldn't go home. He remembered intimately the moment he'd immersed himself in that vivid, kaleidoscopic world. Too impatient to wait for his tanks to be filled, he'd only snorkelled that afternoon, in shallow water on the inner reef not far from his hotel. It was a clear day, and still, and he dropped anchor just off the edge of a group of bommies close to shore.

Gliding out from the boat, as he adjusted his mask, he was circled by streams of light-reflecting

fish. Without a weight belt, he let himself drift in the shallows, diving to the bottom from time to time to anchor himself to seagrass or clutch hold of the reef. Below him on the sea-bed, feather-stars hid in swaying, fine-stemmed corals. Shoals of delicate neon fish flickered from blue to yellow to blue as they darted in and out of the light. He remembered his shock at the clarity of the water, and the way the unending variety of corals were reflected, moving, on the surface above. On the sand, the shadows of bommies and caves were deep and dark. There, groups of larger fish and reef sharks hid. Huge schools of pale white bream passed in the distance like angels. Hanging motionless in the water, he let the current carry his body across the reef. Time seemed suspended. It wasn't until the tightness of his mask began to cut into his skin and the tropical water began to feel cold that he swam back to the boat he'd hired. He peeled back his wetsuit like an unwanted skin, and sat in the stern as the tide passed into the lagoon from the ocean, like an intake of breath.

In the weeks that followed he'd packed up the flat he'd rented on the Scottish coast, and flown back to the Pacific. What he did was a way of staying, a way of earning a living and finding some tenuous acceptance on those islands. He wrote long letters home justifying his work, pointing out that it was better that it was him – someone with knowledge, someone who cared – than those reckless divers who used cyanide to stun their catch. He told himself it was temporary. He was disgusted by the wealthy aquarium owners who professed love for the fish and the coral he sold them, but never asked where they came from. They never asked how they travelled, packed in tiny plastic bags and shipped thousands of miles across the surface of the earth, or how few survived the journey. To dull the guilt he sat under palms with the locals and drank kava and American beer. He made his home on a small yacht with a long history.

\*

Michael met Chantal in a bar behind the Nuku'alofa port. He'd spent the day working on a string of reefs off Ha'apai's outlying atolls, harvesting mainly anemone fish with a group of three other divers. They were working with a cylinder of compressed air in the boat, which was funnelled through hoses to the seabed in order to flush out the sheltering fish. Most of the divers worked bare-handed, rifling through the tentacles of anemones and soft corals with their fingers before sweeping the fish into bags.

When he'd filled his first two, Michael pierced the skin of each bag with a tubular bladder to release some of the air, then, signalling to his buddy, slowly followed the hose back up to the boat. The low cloud had turned the sea around him grey and darkened its shadows. After dropping off the catch and checking the time with Pema, he descended again. The other divers had moved across the reef and were working a giant cabbage-head coral, not far from the outer wall. Undisturbed by the bubbles, a group of heavy reef sharks wove around the coral head, feeding on fish eggs and occasionally brushing teasingly against the length of the hose.

Rather than immediately re-joining his partner, he swam down towards a channel that led out from the bommie towards the open sea. Schools of cardinal fish eddied in and out of the coral tiers on the channel wall. As he steered them into the open bag, a large, egg-carrying seahorse glided out of the tangle of sea-whips at his side. Instead of catching it, on a whim he followed it at a distance down the length of the channel where, reaching the edge of the reef, it disappeared into a mass of velvet fans. As the rock beneath him dropped away, Michael felt a cold water current from below propel his body forward, and, unprepared for the magnitude of the drop, for a split-second he imagined he was falling. Once he steadied himself, he realised the hose in his hand had begun to pull tight. He knew he'd swum too far from the boat, but before turning back, kicked away from the ledge and out into the unbroken blue. For several minutes, he let himself hang suspended in the water, taking in the immensity of the shelf. As he watched a huge school of tuna pulse like slow-breaking waves along the face of the rock, a sudden movement in the depths below him made his legs contract towards his gut. Out of the darkness, in the vast shadow cast by the reef, a tiger shark, more than twice the length of his body, was zig-zagging towards him up the vertical wall.

There are rules about holding your breath under-water. He could remember his instructor describing the physiology of a dive before they'd first hit the pool. At any real depth, if you try to hold your breath, the air in your lungs can increase your body's buoyancy and cause an involuntary ascent. The decrease in pressure that results makes the trapped air expand and seep into your blood-stream, triggering a life-threatening, sometimes instantaneous condition that is similar to the bends. In those minutes with the shark, two thoughts had passed continually through his head – the text-book case against holding his breath, and the overwhelming realisation that he didn't belong.

That night, in the open-air bar where he drank often after work, buoyed by adrenalin he'd told a group of friends and strangers how the shark had circled him twice before he was certain it was going to attack. Drunk on humidity and imported beer, the crowd had listened with enthusiastic

horror.

‘Five metres?! That’s some fucking fish.’ Carlos, a Californian tour guide he knew from too many nights of drinking, slammed his glass on the table. ‘I’ve seen that size from the boat before. But up close? Jesus. You’re one lucky boy, Mike.’

‘Yeah well...’ His dive-buddy, Faipa, smirked and elbowed him in his already aching ribs. ‘You know stuff looks bigger under water.’

He told them how he’d waited for what seemed like an eternity as the tiger shark had circled. He knew instinctively that he was too far from the reef to try to swim. Nauseous with anticipation, he managed to curl his body into a ball, extending his fingers in preparation to gouge the creature’s eyes. When it struck, the enormous force of the blow sent him somersaulting sideways through the water, dislodging his mouth-piece and flooding his mask. The shark had torn off one of his flippers, chewing it briefly, then dropping it in distaste as it circled him once more. In his shock he wasn’t sure if it had taken his foot. He looked down to see the water around his legs turning red from the gash on his ankle, and let go of the bag of fish that he was somehow still holding. The unsealed bag floated slowly away with the panicked fish darting around inside, and something in the way it moved or caught the light captured the attention of the circling shark. Instead of striking again as he’d been certain that it would, it veered off after the bag and began to nudge it back and forth through the water.

In those minutes or seconds while it toyed with the bag, he remembered swimming in the same measured way he’d followed the seahorse only moments before, back towards the shelter of the reef, and pressing his body flat against the channel’s coral wall. By the time the others had found him, his hands were bloody from clutching at the rock, and he had very little oxygen left in his tank. Though, for a reason he couldn’t explain, he didn’t mention it to his friends as he recounted the story, as he’d surfaced, ringed by the three other divers, he’d realised as he’d waited he’d been wracked with concern about the risk that the plastic bag had posed to the shark.

‘I would have swum for it’ said Faipa. ‘That must have been your first instinct, right?’

‘I wouldn’t have made it.’ He realised as he said it how certain he was it was true.

‘Most don’t’ added Carlos. ‘But the bag – you’ve gotta love that! Saved by a bag of friggin’ fish!’

They laughed and went on and on and Michael began to lose track of what was being said. The stitches in his ankle were starting to throb, and the rush of adrenalin that had lasted so long had been replaced by an increasingly potent fatigue. Rubbing his eyes, he looked out across the dock

towards the now indiscernible ocean. The crowd in the night-club had started to thin, and, despite his exhaustion, he felt an odd wave of grief at the loss of his once attentive audience. Among them, Chantal still stood, now alone, at the far end of the bar. He'd noticed her occasionally during the night. She seemed to be part of a small group of tourists who'd got to know Faipa. Resting on a stool, she'd propped her elbows on the bar and leant forward as she'd unfolded a map. He could see that her shoulders had the flushed glow of skin that was un-used to the tropical heat. Later, while he spoke about the shark, she had watched him with composed fascination, rarely taking her eyes from his face.

'But what went through your head?' she'd asked.

In the morning, she stood on the shore at dawn and called out his name until he got out of bed.

There was something about her that captivated him from the beginning, some sense of possibility. She was bold and unpredictable, and beautiful in an oddly ephemeral way. She didn't dive, but floated above him on the surface with her snorkel, like wet-suit clad flotsam. He gripped her hand as they drifted in the shallows of the reef, and afterwards, always breathless, she spoke for hours about the colour and grace and luminosity of the fish.

She couldn't hide the fact that she hated his work, but listened to his justifications.

'My mother had an aquarium' she told him. They were sitting on a sandbar where he'd anchored for a dive. She drew a tank and a fish in the sand by her feet. 'It had a violet light, and a plastic wreck and I remember the hum of the filter at night. We had an angel-fish, *mon petit ange*, who rubbed his sides against the glass.' She pulled her knees towards her chin and brushed the sand from her wetsuit. 'He must have spent four or five years in that tank... I remember thinking how fortunate we were - to own our very own piece of the sea.'

'I won't be doing this forever,' he said, trying to swallow the defensiveness in his voice. 'If we stay, I'll figure things out and find some other work soon enough.'

'I know you will' she said. 'It's just, I never considered that fish may have come from a reef like this. And I thought he was lucky to have a home in our tank, with its artificial light and a coral cave.... I'm just saying that it was still something beautiful in its way. Despite the truth. Even though it wasn't real.' She stopped scribbling and turned and took his hand. He looked down at the pictures she'd drawn in the sand and, shrugging his shoulders, realised with shame that he couldn't meet her gaze.

Although she often reassured him, she had an air of remoteness that throughout their relationship plagued him with doubt. There was something in the way she smiled openly at strangers, and stared out at the horizon, which made him feel alone. He remembered their first night together aboard Toa, lying awake while she slept in his arms, their skin too sticky with sweat to part. He'd watched her face and the way she breathed and her hair spread out like seagrass on her pillow, and he knew that she would leave him. He knew that no matter what he did she would leave and he'd follow her but wouldn't be able to stay. That evening, when the mosquitoes were thick and fierce and the heat and darkness stilled the air - they had fought, over some trivial, inconsequential thing. He'd watched as the anger formed on her face, and saw her body dissolve into polyps and pearls that he knew he couldn't keep.

After a year together in Tonga they'd gone back to her life in Montreal. Ice-crystals formed on the ends of her eyelashes. He watched the water freeze thick across the river. They drank too much, and argued in pubs and cafes and across the morning papers. Listless, he spent long days alone in their flat with his feet against the heater. Chantal tried to get him research work on a campus across the city. She read him novels in French while, uncomprehending, he fell asleep to the rolling intonations of her voice. They rarely spoke about Tonga, both afraid if it was mentioned it wouldn't go away. But he thought of it, in the small hours and on walks beside the river. He ran his fingers over photographs like the body of a lover, and dreamt of the coral crust of the Pacific.

\*

It was during the months before they'd met that he'd started taking fish. With his visa due to expire he'd contacted an acquaintance who'd mentioned he may have some work. The business was legitimate under Tongan law, but the legislation surrounding live exports was lax, and his boss, who co-ordinated the dives from an office in Nuku'alofa, was adept at exploiting its loopholes. During the week he dived off the atolls of Ha'apai, and flew back to Tongatapu each Friday with his catch.

At first he took mainly the most lucrative fish, the angels and clown-fish whose bold lines and flashy colours attracted the buyers. Occasionally a pipefish or seahorse would swim lazily into

the path of his nets. They were beautiful, exotic fish, and aquarists payed high prices for the few who survived to reach the market. He spent as little time as possible in the storeroom at the back of the office. The exports were someone else's job, and he took care to limit his knowledge of how the process worked, or failed.

With time, he lost interest in the money he was making, and with it, the heart to discriminate between fish. He took what he could, and sat on the plane to Nuku'alofa with his heart turning slowly to stone.

Light penetrates the skin of the ocean. Close to the surface it is wide and diffuse, blue like turquoise. Further down it breaks into shimmering beams of coral-dust, plankton, translucent jellyfish and shoals of tiny, silver-flecked fish. Below, in the channels where he dived for soft-corals, the light begins to lose its reach. In these depths, the water absorbs and alters the colours of the reef. Blood runs green in a dimly lit world of blues and greys and shadow.

On the yacht with Chantal, they lay awake at night and talked about their future, and their life in Quebec.

'You get used to it, being away from the sea.' She lifted the net above their bunk with her toes. 'When you can't see it or hear it, it takes up a smaller and smaller space in your head. And it's not so far either – on weekends we can drive to the Gulf of St Lawrence... You'll love it. We can go out there as often as you want.'

'I can't really imagine life away from the reef.'

'But you can still dive, and you'll be free of this awful job. There are the rivers, and *belugas* in Hudson Bay.'

'Sure.' He remembered his cold-water diving: the grey skins of seals, the forests of kelp. 'I just want you to know it won't be easy to leave.'

'Then leave *me*, Michael,' she said, 'and stay.' She rolled over, muttering something in French, but he knew this was only a game.

'Right.' He slid the palm of his hand into the warm small of her back.

She was different at night, somehow slower, more conscious of her body and the colour of her clothes. Sometimes she lay so still that he felt if he looked hard enough he would see beyond the surface of her skin. But mostly she seemed to him to be mercurial – flirtatious – and that was always a source of tension between them: the lightness with which she glided among other men

at a bar, the ease she showed with others, and the sudden flash of her laugh. He never believed that she needed him, but that only made him want her more. In bed she rolled and swayed across his body. Her desire, like her anger, broke across him like a wave.

Chantal was the only force that pulled him from the islands. For some time after they'd first separated they'd tried to be friends, but there was so much going on beneath the surface of their friendship that they'd succumbed to temptation again and again, and left more unresolved, more unsaid every time they were together. He could no longer tell if it was simply lust, or some stronger connection that pulled them together. She'd had other lovers since him, and he knew it was only a matter of time before he was no longer welcomed, and their attempts at friendship became impossible.

The last time he saw her they'd met for dinner in a restaurant near her apartment in Montreal.

'You look tired,' she'd said, 'and older.'

'Thanks.' He managed a half-hearted smile. 'I don't seem to sleep a lot these days.'

The waiter brought their wine and they sat for a moment in a silence that was lengthened by their shared past. He noticed she seemed less present, more distracted than she'd been when he'd last seen her. Her hair was longer and loose around her shoulders, and she wore a dress he didn't recognise. He wondered if there was anyone new in her life, but stopped himself from asking.

'I'm having trouble figuring out what to do' he'd said. 'My visa's almost up.'

'Will you go back to Scotland?' He shook his head and filled his glass with the unchilled wine. Outside on the street, snow started to fall and settle on the sills of the windows.

'I'm just concerned for you, Michael...' She'd held his gaze for as long as she could.

'You love it there. I know. But perhaps you should just cut your losses and let go...'

\*

The flat in Montreal had a single window which flooded their bedroom with grey, absent light. For a week before he'd left her he spent most of each day stretched out across the sheets of the unmade bed. By then he'd stopped going into work, and had memorised the cracks in the ceiling like an escape route on a map.

'So you give up??' He was startled by the violence in her voice. 'Because if you plan to waste away, perhaps you should do it in some other woman's house!' She picked up a pile of



clothes and a paperback on warm-water reefs that was lying on the floor, muttered: 'You already stink like a single man,' and then hurled the book towards his head. 'I can't do this anymore!' she cried. 'At least if there *were* another woman I'd have someone flesh and blood that I could hate!'

'You don't get it –'

'I get that it's beautiful! Ok? I get it's unbearably beautiful and fragile. All those things. I get that it's not enough for you to just know that and relish that. But it's *your* problem, Michael. It's not *mine*... not *ours*... and I can't carry it around with me anymore. I know you're going to leave. I know you choose your stupid reef. And I'm sick of waiting for it to happen!' She turned her back to him and looked around the room as if she were searching for something else to throw, then, hunching over, hugged her arms across her chest and sat back on the bed by his feet. Her cheeks were wet. 'I'm so sick of waiting...' she sobbed. 'This is over, ok? It's over.' Michael sat up and put his hands on her shoulders. She was trembling. He wanted to comfort her. But instead of pulling her towards him he slipped his hands under the neck of her shirt and ran his index fingers down her shoulder blades. Her skin felt warm and damp under his palms. He could hear his own breath deepening as he moved his hands back up to her shoulders, then skimmed his fingers down over her neck, under her bra and across her breasts, circling over her nipples. Still crying, Chantal sat rigid and unmoving on the bed, but he felt her flesh hardening under his touch. He pulled her around to face him. She wouldn't look at him. He pushed his knee between hers, pushing up her skirt and parting her thighs. 'I don't want this...' she said. Gripping her arms, he pushed her back on the bed and pulled off her pants and started to touch her, firmly, the way she'd taught him to touch her, the way he'd done countless times before.

'You're so perfect. So perfect.' He moved his hand faster while with the other he started fumbling with his belt.

'*No Michael... Please...*' Her voice under-water. He could feel her grabbing and tugging at his wrist.

'I want you so much.'

'*Get off me! Get off!*' A sudden excruciating pain flooded his groin, as, twisting her knee, she slid her body out from under his weight. She stood up and sprang away from the bed. Rolling over, he rubbed his hands across his eyes. Chantal was leaning on the window ledge, trying to button her half-open shirt and weeping like a child. When she looked up at him, he realised with horror that there was real fear in her eyes. 'What did you think you were doing!?' She cried. 'I told you no! What the fuck were you doing??'

In the shallows of the reef, where a storm has passed, huge cornices of coral, ripped from the sea-bed, lie over-turned and covered in sand. Thickets of staghorn and up-rooted fans fade to a dull and lifeless grey. There are few fish here, the water is gloomy and pale, and visibility rapidly drops away. Sometimes he worked on the edges of these places, among channels and caves that had collapsed under the weight of the reef's debris. Those fish that remained seemed to move in a kind of soporific trance, and were easy to catch, but each time he dived he surfaced with a feeling of unease.

The last time he went out with the boat he had told Faipa of his plans to go to Montreal. They were crammed in the bow with their dive gear on their way to one of their regular reefs. There was enough swell to slow the boat down but they still fell heavily off the back of every wave and occasionally had green water over the bow.

'I don't feel I have a choice' he said, raising his voice above the outboard. Faipa adjusted his grip on the rail. The engine slowed and they moved out of the swell into the shadow of the islands.

'That's what I don't get about you, man' he started running through a check of the settings on his rig. 'You have everything, but you think you're trapped.' He waved his hands in exaggerated disbelief, then pulled down his mask and disappeared over the side.

By the time they got back to the boat, the sea-breeze was knocking the crests off the swell and the flocks of terns and skuas that had waited on the water through the morning had retreated to the coast. It was cold. The boat sat lower in the water with the weight of an over-quota catch. Shivering, Michael wiped the salt from his face and peeled off the top half of his wetsuit. He looked at the polystyrene boxes where the fish were stowed around the console. In the stern, someone was telling a joke, and Pema was pretending to bail out the boat. Faipa took a drink from his flask and then offered it to Michael, who shook his head.

'Listen,' said Faipa, following his eyes. 'I think about it, too. You're not the only one with guilt, you know. But these reefs... you know they've always been fished. One way or another. I hate to say it but I'm not sure you belong here. You seem to need it too much. That's not always good.'

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*By the time he'd retrieved the knife a faint green light was skimming the horizon to the east, the*

*first delineating line between the unbroken stillness of ocean and sky. In the cockpit, he runs his finger down the dull edge of the blade, tucks the knife into the harness of his dive bag, and then wiping away the condensation in his mask, lowers himself back into the water. On this first dive, he follows the limp and vertical chain down to the sand beneath the hull. There is just enough light to make out the outlines of the bommies a few metres to the north of the yacht. The coral, which he is used to treating with care, snaps off surprisingly easily in his hands. It's brittle and delicate. He feels its fine stems and antlers shattering as he shoves them in the bag. It is still too dark to see in any detail, but he knows by feel the fleshy stomach of a sea hare, and the clinging arms of a blue sea star that wraps itself around his hand.*

*Each time he dives he returns to the boat with more of the reef collected in his arms. As the dawn breaks, he empties a dive bag of seagrass and blood-coloured rocks into the lockers of the yacht. By midday, exhausted by the repeated dives, he clears a body-sized space in the coral on his bunk and sleeps for several hours. When mosquitoes cross the water of the bay, he wakes, and begins to dive again. On the shore, a small crowd of children gather. They stand watching at the edge of the unmoving ocean, and skim flat stones and shells in the direction of the yacht.*

*The more he dives the further he is forced to swim from the boat to find what he wants. He doesn't notice the way that Toa's hull lies lower and lower in the water. With a net from the bow he begins to collect the small bright fish that dart across the reef. He scours the sand below the keel for flounder and transparent shrimps, stowing them with a cuttlefish in a large glass jar, and an eel pressed into a bottle.*

*By the time he has worked his way over several bommies, he starts to notice an element of fatalism in the behaviour of the fish. A sea-snake, banded and venomous, entwines its body around the handle of his net. Blue-lipped clams and anemones offer no form of resistance as he scrapes them from the rock.*

*Over several days and nights he strips the reef of its glittering, abundant life. He holds it captive in aquariums of fortified glass, and hoards it in the cupboards and the lockers of the yacht. In the cockpit, fish of shimmering blue float lifeless in portable tanks. The first bags of soft corals have started to rot, and on the chart-table, jars of baby squid are stagnant and discoloured. On the bookshelves, dust collects across the polished backs of shells. Paper nautilus grow sticky with the glue of price tags, the dull world coats their luminous skins.*

*After so many days of diving the deck is littered with decomposing fish and plants. He has been so long in the water his flesh has turned pale. His fingers are numb and wrinkled. Once more,*

*he hauls himself onto the boat, and dropping the crabs he'd dug out of the mud into a bucket under the tiller, rolls himself a stale cigarette and sits still in the sun. Each time he breaks the surface of the sea he collects a film of orange algae on his skin.*

*Across the bay, a fisherman in an out-rigger canoe paddles out to a net on the edge of the reef, then turns and goes back to his pots on the beach. Michael watches as again the boat glides out, and returns. The third time, after making adjustments to the net, rather than heading straight back to the beach the canoe alters course and the fisherman paddles out to where Toa is anchored. He is still occasionally approached in this way by the most persevering of the boys on the shore, who row out to visiting yachts selling fish or coconuts or woven mats. For a moment he considers ducking into the cabin in the hope of being unseen, but he has barely the energy left to move, and the hatch is almost completely blocked by clam-shells and nets of coral.*

*As the canoe draws close it leaves a wake of clear water across the algae. For the first time Michael notices the way it has collected and thickened around the hull of the yacht. He has seen this man before, cleaning fish on the rocks, with his head bent low over the water. For some minutes they try in vain to communicate in Tongan, and in broken French. His own voice sounds strange and foreign, as though it has travelled over distance, or been dredged from the sea. When the fisherman raises his palm he thinks for a moment it's in some belated greeting. But the man glides the out-rigger away from the yacht, and points to the skirting rail under Michael's feet. He looks down. Toa's wooden deck, barely visible now beneath the carcasses of fish, is starting to sink below the surface. Beside the canoe, where the water is clear, he sees his own face, reflected in the mirror of the sea.*

## Shelter

They found places to keep things, islands, that's how it started. Atolls for cartons of egg shells, for foreign postcards stacked in boxes. Archipelagos cluttered with shipping-crates of photographs, moss-terrariums, insects adrift in methyl-alcohol, vials of nectar, jars of ochre-coloured soil. Islets devoted to feathers, to gem-stones they'd found while still clinging to the mainland coast, still sifting through the deserts. Uncut sapphires glinting in torch light, kicked over on the goldfields – carried now in buckets with amber, quartz, granite flecked with mica – coated with dust from dilapidated shacks, busted cities, from the gully where their tumbling down home had once stood, leaning into the westerlies, into winds that brought ice then razed forests, seared the green of the plains.

They had an atoll for seeds, un-germinated seeds which they'd stored for posterity, a vestige of hope. They ferried them to that island in flotillas of walnut shell boats, while the ocean was still as a stone. She remembers that day as the last when they knew they could still return to their home.

They built shelters: a tower of spiralling shell, bunkers lined with coral, they slept on pandanus. When night fell they paced out the shores of their islands – the silt coves – they followed the rhythms, the turnings of the luminescent tide, they spoke about the sky, about the lights they saw sometimes in the distance, the fishing hulks, the ferries carrying children, rising, falling on the horizon to the north.

‘What will we do if they come here?’

‘Why would anyone come?’

‘If they're lost?’

‘These islands are too small, they're too low. They will see that.’

‘But those boats, they're not safe.’

‘If they come here we will go.’

And things did come: discarded things, a child in a basket of reeds, up-turned rafts, leather boots, things that sting. They fended them off, they waded into the shallows and veered them off-shore with poles whittled from palms, with nets woven of shoe-laces, frayed ends of string. They were grateful for the fins, for the singing.

The winds came. They swept over the islands like a flood. Pieces of damp paper, torn letters shivering in leaves, in the branches, filled the air above their islands like locusts – cicadas falling from the spinning of the sky – catching in her hair, covering the floor of his boat. In the tower she pieced them together, words about love, about things they had lost.

‘Will nothing grow now?’

‘I don’t know. Some things will.’

She placed her hand on the warmth of her belly, she remembered the swelling, the kicking of feet, tiny elbows sculpting tents out of skin. She thought of the child in the basket.

‘He could have stayed. There is room.’

‘It’s too late.’

## This Butterfly

They're not part of a world of numbers or hours. They exist mostly without money. But sometimes Beth sits in underground stations and sings with her guitar, and her eyes are such a pearlescent blue and her voice so clear above the echoing trains that her hat fills quickly, and always before the inspectors do their rounds and ask her to move on. It's not something she does often, and Miles doesn't ask her to, despite it being so much more lucrative than begging. Because he knows how she hates to be watched in that way. He has seen it himself, sitting as he usually does at the other end of the platform. The doors of the train opening and the eyes – glazed in that city-weary way – lifting from phones and tabloids to her face and her own eyes, fixed on some immeasurable point, or tracing the cracks in the concrete at her feet.

When he thinks back on that night he can see every detail of the station, as though he'd been there with her. He can smell the damp of the tunnels and in the stale air the blended aftershave and perfumes of the people on the platform, the over-bright fluorescents beating down on wool hats and crimped blonde hair. There's the stench of the drunk sitting slumped in the corner, and around him that circle of empty space. It's a space that Miles knows intimately now. It has followed him since the day he left home and it follows Beth too and he knows for certain it was there around her guitar-case that night, on the otherwise crowded platform. He can feel the wash of icy wind that accompanies the train. The doors are slow to open and he can see the eyes of the commuters turning towards the front where they imagine the faceless driver must be; the pin-tucked suits at the edge of the platform stepping forward to try the buzzers again.

When the doors finally open, among the grey, a crowd of football fans spill out of the carriage close to Beth. They have open cans of lager and their sweating faces are painted red. For a moment her singing disappears under their chanting. But she wouldn't have stopped, he knows

this for certain. She would have kept singing, her voice no more audible than a whisper below the rush of the departing train.

*‘Flicker-flicker-flicker-flicker here you are...’* The people on the edge of the empty space hear her. They push back their head-sets and though they keep walking and never stray into the space their faces seem to alter, grow still.

He doesn't know when it was that she realised he was late, and he wonders if she watched the clock above the stairs between songs and how long she might have waited. He can picture the uncertainty growing on her face, and hear the quiver of distraction as it entered her voice. He can see her settling the small guitar into its cigarette-burned case, and emptying the money she has earned into the pocket of her coat. The passengers in the carriages still watch her, through the windows, as they cling to the overhead hand-holds, their bodies swaying in awkward symmetry as the train starts to move. He'll never know if it was someone who had followed her from there, or if it was someone who had noticed her later, as she made her way back to the squat in the dark. All he can see is himself in the bookshop and the woman behind the counter starting to lock up and him running to the station and a guard on the gate and the escalators blocked.

He doesn't find her until an hour after dawn. She is lying in the alleyway that runs behind the squat. It's been raining, and the pools of water on the footpath around her reflect the parting clouds. From a distance, her body looks so small and insubstantial that at first he thinks only what's left of her clothes are bundled there on the path. She is curled up like a baby and clutching her stomach. The reflections beside her are diluted with blood.

*‘Beth...’* She's soaking wet and shivering. He puts his hand on her forehead and slides her hair off her face. Her eyes are closed. They're swollen and black. The dress with the owls is in shreds across her chest. Miles pulls off his coat and, lifting her from the ground as gently as he can, wraps it around her body.

*‘I'm getting help...’* He whispers, stroking her hair. *‘I missed the train. I'm so sorry.’* He looks at the street, which is only metres away from where she is lying. Out there the sun is streaming down, mist is rising from the warm, wet road. A few early commuters cross the entrance to the lane, drinking take-away coffees and plugged into music. He calls out for help in a voice he doesn't recognise as his own, but the one man who pauses and turns his head looks away again in fear. Miles squats down and slides his arm under the small of Beth's back. She is cold and limp, like some kind of doll. Her head falls lifelessly over his arm.

There's a phone-box on the street, just beside the lane. When he reaches it he pushes the door open with his back, and struggles to pick up the receiver. It's dead. It's dead like it has been for months, there's not even a dial tone.



‘Fucking phone!’ He kicks the base of the door. A couple cross the street to avoid them. He starts to walk, unsure of which direction he should take. He can feel the warmth of her blood on his stomach as it seeps into his shirt.

‘We’ll get a bus.’ He whispers, mostly to himself. He manages to get to the stop before his legs start to buckle under her weight. He sinks down to the ground with his back against the shelter. Beth starts to moan.

He closes his eyes and thinks about the book he was reading in the bookshop when he should have been with her, the hard black cover with the oscillating lines, curved into the wings of a butterfly. *Chaos*. The bus leans so fast around the corner that he is not sure it will stop. But it does, and the doors unfold and before Miles can get up the driver gets out of the booth behind the wheel and steps down onto the footpath. He moves quickly. Miles finds it difficult to understand his accent, but the man kneels down and leans over Beth. He can feel the warmth of his breath on his arm as he folds the coat across the wound on her stomach, and holds it there with the heel of his palm.

‘She needs an ambulance.’ He says, and places Miles’ hand on the coat as he moves his own away. ‘Keep it here. Press firmly. Not hard. I wait with you, all right?’ He climbs back on the bus and speaks into his radio. One of the passengers calls out protests from the back.

‘They’re *children*,’ he hears someone whisper.

She’s in hospital for seven days. For the first three, she sleeps, and on the fourth, when she wakes, she starts to cry and doesn’t stop. On the sixth day she asks for water. She is so pale that he wonders if he should call a nurse, but she says she’s ok, and for the first time she sits upright in the bed.

It must be late, the corridors are quiet except for a woman collecting trays of untouched food, and the lights outside the door are dimmed. There’s no window in the room, and without any natural light it is only the rhythms of the staff which mark out the passage of time. Miles knows how the routine goes now: the visiting hours full of whispered conversations and rustling bags of fruit, meals with the smell of over-cooked meat and the irregular roll of the trolley. Through it all there are the visits of nurses in white and doctors with clipboards, who don’t notice he’s there, and the cleaner’s, who do, who swing their bleach-soaked mops more violently around him on the floor.

‘I kind of like it here. That’s weird, right?’

Beth almost smiles, but doesn’t meet his eye.

‘You are a little weird.’

‘There was someone from the shelter here, while you were sleeping.’

Beth looks alarmed.

‘What did they say?’

‘The usual. Foster-homes and shit.’

‘But not together?’

‘No.’ Before he can say more Beth slides back down into the bed. She rolls onto her side, so she's facing the wall, and pulls the blanket up under her chin.

‘Have they said when they think I'll be ok to go?’

‘No. Sorry. I don't really know. Soon, I guess.’

On the bus, Beth keeps her eyes on the window beside her, but the stares of the other passengers are reflected in the glass. When they get to the squat, Yani is drunk so they have to break in through the window in the bathroom. Miles drops the bag of bandages and medicines they'd taken from the hospital, onto the floor, then turns to go out to the kitchen to see if there's any food, but Beth grabs hold of his forearm.

‘Could you stay with me?’ She asks. ‘And just talk? Tell me something good, maybe stuff about your mum?’

Miles closes the door and tightens the knot of wire around the handle. He looks up at the ceiling and the sagging black sheet with its galaxies of pin-hole planets. One corner has come loose from its nail and he can hear the bulb behind it buzzing, like it's on its last legs. *Hold on.* He thinks. *Just one more night.* He closes his eyes and tries to clear his head. He blocks out the swell of white noise on Yani's radio in the kitchen, the drone of the braking buses on the road behind the glass. He looks at Beth, curled up under the threadbare yellow blanket, and tries to block out the image of her lying in the lane that hovers at the edge of his thoughts.

‘I used to go to this place with Viv sometimes, where they kept butterflies...over the river.’ He drags the rug off the mattress behind him and tugs it around his shoulders. ‘At the gate they gave us pictures of a certain kind of butterfly to find. Just one type of butterfly that had red across its wings, or a striped black body, shit like that.’ He looks over at Beth who is lying so still that at first he thinks she might have fallen asleep, but he can see her eyes are open, staring up at the sheet. ‘When you left you were meant to tell them if you'd seen it – this one butterfly – and where and what it was doing and they'd write it all down like it was some big deal and you'd done something so great. I used to love that. But mostly I never found the right one. When you got in there they were everywhere. Every colour you could dream of. And they'd just land all over you and not even care...’ In the kitchen the radio goes dead. Yani starts swearing, and Miles hears something shatter. ‘We used to spend all day out there. We'd eat

chips on the grass and you couldn't see the sky for all the birds.' Yani's ranting now, mostly meaningless stuff, but occasionally Miles hears his own name. 'There was something about that place,' he says. He looks at Beth, her eyes are closed. 'They were the best days.... All those butterflies, all different... Like the whole world was there. Just in that one place.'

It's winter, and the city is always dark. The lights don't seem to make a difference. Without Beth's busking Miles has to steal so they can make it through the day. For weeks, Beth doesn't leave the squat. She sleeps rolled up in the blanket and when she wakes she stares up at the collapsing milky-way. Most days, the only thing she seems interested in is listening to his stories. He tells her about the Christmases he spent with Viv, when things were good, and winters in the house outside the city he can only just remember.

Beth had always had nightmares, but now she has them more. She wakes up screaming. Sometimes she gets out of her bed and starts kicking him and screaming:

'GET OUT! GET OUT!!' before she wakes. Yani thumps the wall:

'Yeah that's right! Just fuck'n get out! You can both just fuck off! Fuck'n kids.'

Afterwards, she falls asleep again, crying, but quickly, while Miles lies awake and thinks about the things he could have done and the things he did instead.

\*

Beth is sleeping. He knows she will sleep all day. At the butterfly house there's a charge on the gate so he has to go in over the fence. It's easy enough. At the far end of the park there's a grove of oaks, their branches hanging low over both sides of the wall. A notice on the door of the glass-house says the butterflies are in between seasons. He pushes through the over-grown ferns to the stone edge of the fountain where his mother used to sit. He pulls off his scarf, his jacket. Below the fountain, a trail of ants navigate their way between the shrivelled purple flowers where the water used to be. He watches them disappearing into a crack in the base of the empty pool. The air smells sweet and stagnant. He hears the click of a shutter and thinks about his mother and the crappy little camera she used to use.

It's only after he sits still for a while that he really starts to notice the butterflies. They make short flights - from leaf, to wall, to stone. They move awkwardly, as if they needed the wind to propel them through the air, as if flight were new and their wings untried. Once he starts to focus, he realises they are everywhere around him: hovering above the dried up pool, flapping

against the curved glass roof. Beside his boots, a group of them sit drinking the beads of water that collect under the leaking tap. They flutter around his mohawk as though it were some exotic, nectar-drenched flower. He wants to laugh, but the silent garden makes him feel self-conscious. He lies back along the wall and lets them crawl across his chest. He watches them long after the tourists have gone.

When he gets back to the squat Beth is heating an open tin of spaghetti on the single burner stove, stirring it as effectively as she can with a fork. She pulls the sleeves of her jumper over her fingers so she can grip hold of the half-opened top of the can, which is constantly threatening to fall over. He can hear the sound of the television in the flat next door through the plaster walls, a quiz show punctuated by sporadic applause and the same exuberant musical refrain repeated over and over. She doesn't turn from the stove when he comes in but he can see enough of her face to notice how the bruising around her eyes has changed colour. The black has been replaced by purple rings, there are bright yellow blotches where there was blue.

'I've been out to that place, with the butterflies,' he says. He stands two bowls and a fork under the tap, and clears a space on the table. 'You're gonna love it. It's over the river. We could ride out there tomorrow if you want?'

Beth puts the tin on the table next to the fine black ash of an upturned pipe, which she slices in two with her fingertip, and shrugs. The spaghetti is old and tastes bitter, fermented. Next door, the volume of the game show goes up:

'Two weeks in Ibiza!' they hear, over the music and applause.

'You have it.' Beth whispers, sliding her bowl towards him across the table. 'I'm not that hungry... I thought I was, but I'm not.'

Later, lying in bed, he thinks of those days when he'd tried and failed to find the right butterfly. He rolls over and looks at Beth who is wrapped up so tightly in her blanket he can't see her at all.

\*

He'd spent the whole day begging in the streets of the inner city. It was raining, he was soaking wet and freezing and he had made next to nothing. On the way to the station he took a detour

passed the backdoor of a bakery where he used to go with Viv, and found bags of bread loaves and rolls by the bins. They were still so fresh they were almost warm. He sat on the train and crammed the soft white dough into his mouth.

At the squat, the kitchen smells like the bleach the cleaners had used on the hospital floor. The stink is stained with something blue.

‘Beth?’ He takes the bag of rolls to their room and calls her name before he opens the door. The room is empty. Beth’s blankets are spread across the floor. There is a strong perfume-like scent in the air. After all the dough he’s eaten it makes him want to wretch.

It’s the middle of the night when she turns on the light. Miles rolls over, and pulls the covers over his head.

‘Let’s go now.’ Beth is leaning right over his bed and trying to pull back the blanket.

‘Go away.’ He groans, but opens his eyes just enough to see her face.

‘I want to see if they sleep,’ she is saying. ‘What do they do at night – butterflies?’ There is just enough light for him to be able to make out the source of the smell, and the colour of her hair.

‘Your hair...’ he mutters. ‘Do you realise it’s blue....? I think they just sleep. Most things sleep.’

‘Not us,’ she is smiling. It’s enough of a smile for him to drag himself up off the bed. ‘We’ve slept enough’ she says.

Before they reach the river, they trace out a path through a maze of lanes and alleys, and along the banks of the canals. The city is old, much older than any of its roads. Its pathways stink of urine and chips, but if you follow them, they can lead you away from the hive to the river, or into its belt of parks.

The wind is bitterly cold. As they ride, Beth buries her face in the hood of Miles’ coat. At the river, they drop the bike on the grass and slide down the muddy bank. Miles tosses a handful of stones into the water. Beth climbs down onto the flood wall and sits on the edge and skims the surface with the heels of her boots. A few metres from the shore there’s a river-bird fishing in the reeds around a half-submerged trolley. It ducks its head under the mud-coloured water, and Miles counts the seconds before it comes up.

*Five, six, seven, eight...*

They watch it surface. Beth reaches down and runs her fingers through the icy water. It is so dark, so polluted that they disappear from sight.

‘Dad made me wings once. Out of cellophane...’ She dips in her knuckles, her whole hand, her wrist. ‘He told me anytime I needed, I could close my eyes and fly away...and I believed him.’

Across the river, a canal boat thumping out music, glides into the dock and the bird disappears. Miles scrambles back up the bank to the bike.

‘Let’s keep going. It’s fucking freezing.’

Getting in is as simple as opening the door behind the shed, which Miles had unbolted the day before.

‘Oh God. So *warm!*’ Beth gasps and pulls off her coat and in the darkness he can see her smile. The butterflies, suspended upside-down from the branches – some clumped together, others alone – are unsettled by the movement. They lift in jittery, shivering clouds. There is very little light, but enough to see their hovering silhouettes. Beth stretches out her arms and two white moths land on the sleeve of her jumper.

‘I knew you’d love it–’ Miles begins, but she holds her finger to her lips.

‘Don’t scare them’ she whispers. ‘I want them to stay.’

Miles leaves her. He tunnels through the thickest of the foliage behind the fountain, towards the paved circle under the dome. He pulls off his coat and lies on his back in the middle of the warm stone floor. A large, mottled butterfly settles on his chest. It holds its wings wide, almost flat, against his shirt. In the upper corner of each burnished wing, two turquoise circles watch him like eyes.

‘All it takes is one wing beat,’ he murmurs, ‘Just one ...to make everything different.’

Beth’s beside him now. She’s lying on her side, her knees towards her chest and her head on her coat, and he sees the flicker of a lighter.

‘Where’d you get that?’

‘A friend.’ The light brightens as she inhales. She gets to her feet, the burning end of the joint, glowing like a firefly. It floats jerkily upwards as she climbs and starts to circle the rim of the pool. Miles watches it twirling away through the palms. It takes the butterflies with it, into the dark.

In mid-winter, Yani drinks too much to work, and there’s no power at the squat. They go to bed in the late afternoon. Without light, Beth tears down the sheet with the stars. Miles finds it later,

on the bank of the canal, snagged on a tree beside the footbridge. It floats lifelessly in the water, and when he tries to drag it free he finds the water-logged body of a pigeon underneath.

When Yani isn't drunk they light a fire out the back and he tells them about the country where his father was born. Islands of chalk in a sea of blue. He tells them when he's sober he'll take them there, to a place where they'll never be cold. Miles thinks about those islands, on nights when he wakes to the stench of the old man leaning over his bed.

\*

This butterfly is the colour of fire, like a lit match. It orbits Miles' mowhawk for several minutes before landing on the skin of his lower arm. Wings twitching, it feels as though it's shuffling its feet, and its tongue seems to be testing him for nectar – the lightest of pin-pricks. He watches it slowly close those wings, and the way this one movement alters its shape.

Behind him, Beth is glowing again and she's reciting some rhyme as she circles the pool.

'It's not that one.' As though she is reading his thoughts. 'It's too obvious, I don't think it's that one...' At the sound of her voice, the butterfly alights, and Miles rolls over on the stone. He looks at Beth, who is crouching like a bird up on the wall. She leans forward and the blue hair falls over her face. She brushes it over her shoulder. In the dim yellow light filtering in from the street, her skin looks almost translucent. Her lips are coloured, like the butterfly's wings. Miles stares at her for a moment, and then looks away.

'Why are you wearing all that shit on your face?'

'I just like it. I thought you liked it.'

'It was better before.'

She's always moving. She paces around the squat and hovers around the windows. As soon as the street-lights turn off after dawn, she goes out, and doesn't come back until dark. Miles doesn't know where she goes anymore. He doesn't ask her if she busks, but sometimes she comes back with money. He sees her leaving, under her coat she wears a crinkled violet dress, red tights cling to her bony legs.

He isn't the only one who's noticed her change. He sees Yani, watching her over the fire, his eyes on the skin that hides under her hair.

The wings are made of coat-hangers. The upper hook of the two silver wires twisted together in the middle of her spine. She's found cellophane somewhere, blue, like her hair, and used the waxy red tape she stole to bind up her boots, to fasten it over the face of the wings. They are strapped to her shoulders with Yani's old bracers. The cellophane crackles when she moves a certain way. They cast a blue shadow on the cracked kitchen window, across the hallway's rising damp. They are already torn.

The last time he sees her wear them there's a DJ in the warehouse on the far edge of the park. He climbs the scaffolding behind the dance-floor and he can see her on the ground below, drifting in and out of a kaleidoscope of light. She is spinning, the wings falling off her shoulders, folding, unfolding, reflecting the lights. He watches her dissolve into the colours of the crowd. Her eyes are closed, and he wonders for a moment if she's found some kind of answer. As she turns, she cranes back her neck and opens her bloodshot eyes and beckons to him, but the crowd swarms in around her again. The lights turn red, turn golden. The music is thumping, the dancer's shuddering, hovering together, they roll across the floor of the warehouse like a wave, engulfing everything but the tips of her wings.



## The Catch

So cold the day the first eggs hatch. A wind the colour of salt and smoke whips across the ledge where you have built your nest. You are uncomfortable, the long weeks of incubation weighing on your body, and you pass the morning transferring the grasses you have gathered on the tide-line from the exposed outer rim into the interior of the nest. Resting on your feet, your warmed egg waits.

The crack appears across the shell the way lightning breaks over the ocean. It's thin and dark, and with it comes the smell of grey-fleshed fish and drying blood. It is some time before the creamy shell around it begins to cave. The incisions your chick has made with its beak are small compared to its body. The egg rocks a-rhythmically. Gradually, a clear, sometimes yellow fluid leaks onto your feet and the nest below. You watch, and resist the urge to push into the crack with the point of your beak.

Trembling now, the egg rolls onto its side and its upper wall shatters against the nest. Your chick, with eyes closed, tries to free his wing from the clinging inner sack. With your beak, you carefully tug it aside with pieces of the remaining shell, and although the chick is not fully hatched, instinctively, you begin to preen his sticky down. There is commotion on the rock as another bird's mate returns from a catch to a nest at your back. The wind rises, and beyond the shore below the sound of the swell grows louder.

Once your chick has freed himself completely from the shell, you gently nudge his frail, flailing body back under the shelter of your wing, but he is hungry, and before long he taps his small beak quickly against your own. It is some time since you have been to sea, but with the little food that is left in your stomach you're able to give your chick a feed, and he sleeps. For a long time you watch the sky over the horizon for signs of your returning mate.

You fly out to the ocean in search of fish. The day you begin you let the East wind carry you high above the black of the sea. The wind is warm, and the heat of the sun beats down upon your back. Far below you, the surface ripples with movement, and something on a swell's back catches your eye. You start to circle, and descent reveals a flock of pale birds feeding from a surfacing shoal.

On the water, the first of the fish you catch is tough and dry. It's almost tasteless, but you are hungry and once it is swallowed you lunge towards another at your side. The fish are angular, some hollow, some flat. They are brilliantly coloured, like the rainbow, and some are too long or too large for you to swallow in one. But you chip at their flesh with the edge of your beak. You stretch back your neck and force them down. Barely moving, and seemingly unafraid, they make easy prey and you spend a long time grazing with the other birds in the centre of the shoal.

The sun lowers, and rises, and lowers again. In the distance an arc of hunting dolphins pierce the waves, and with your belly full, you lift from the water and travel back to your nest and your chick. You are full of trepidation as you land, after leaving him alone, but he is there, and awake, and tapping at your beak. You feed him the strange and brittle fish.

The days grow hot and humid. Your small chick's down is greasy and warm. His hunger is easily satisfied by the coloured fish you bring him, but he is not growing as fast as he should, and he's lethargic, sleeping often in the crook of your wing. His eyes are dull. The salt winds snatch at his feathers. They unravel the grasses you have woven through your nest. You had hoped to rest for several days, but although you are weary, and as your mate has not returned, you fly out again to the ocean.

Through these weeks the winds begin to fail. After feeding you spend long, exhausted hours becalmed on the silent water. There are other birds and among you float the queer and motionless shoal. The sky fills with cloud and darkens the sea. You think of your chick, alone on the rock, and watch as one of the birds at your wing chokes on a large, transparent fish. As the struggling bird tries to lift from the water, half swallowed, the fish expands and contracts and rustles with every panicked breath. Unable to fly, the grey bird flaps across the surface to where others drift, and then grows still.

When the winds rise again you fly south towards your nest on the basalt island. Your chick, like so many others on the rock, is still small and thin. Although you feed him again and again he stays silent, and his strength continues to wane. In his stomach the fish you have gathered for him don't swell and don't dissolve. They provide him no nourishment, but lodge themselves heavy, like stones, in the pit of his tiny gut.

Rain falls. His tapping is slower now. Through half closed eyes he watches the crabs that scuttle across the spray-wet ledge, and the swaying fins of the seals that sleep in the gravel dunes beyond the beach. For a time you let him nuzzle at your side, his little body warm below the feathers of your wing. You close your eyes and yearn for sleep, but return to the ocean in search of fish.

## Drift

When she woke in the late morning, with her neck cramped and the unshaded globe still glowing on the ceiling above her, Nieve tested the shower in the annex behind the shack. Despite the full tanks of winter the pressure was low, but the hot water ran down over her body, and she stood with her hand on the curve of her stomach until she could no longer tell water from tears, tears from water.

After un-packing the car, she pulled her rusted bike from under the tank and rode down to the café on the Arthur Highway. The day was overcast and colourless. Light rain fell on the forested hills. In the café she sat by a circular window with a view of the road and the bay. The waiter who brought her breakfast spoke with an impenetrable middle-eastern accent, had eyes like almonds and spilled her coffee all across the table. It was a weekday and the highway was quiet, and instead of the usual music, the only sounds came from the kitchen and from the wind in the surrounding trees.

As she ate, an American couple at the next table tried to make small-talk. They told her of their plans to picnic at the old penitentiary at the far end of the peninsula. She pictured the brightly coloured couple spread out on a rug in that haunted landscape.

‘Yes,’ she said, ‘it’s a beautiful place,’ and looked out through the glass at the shapes of the trees and the fishing boats moored in the mouth of the inlet. Black swans moved between the tethered yachts.

Turning back to her book, she tried to block out the conversation of the couple, and pushed her eggs, already cold, distractedly around her plate. She felt vaguely nauseous. It had been three days now since the termination, but although her appetite had returned, the memory of her morning sickness lingered still, like something lost.

‘You know you’ll grieve,’ a wise friend had told her, a friend who held her hand so tightly at the clinic she felt the blood throb beneath her fingertips, the warmth of sweat on her palm. ‘It’s natural to grieve.’ But some unfathomed part of her felt that she had lost her right to

the comfort of grief. It was as if she had stepped out, crossed some unspoken border where the natural laws dissolved, and had woken adrift in an ocean without a compass, and without stars.

She'd left the city without any clear idea of how long she intended to stay away. Loose ends, from a tapestry unravelling at the seams, scattered across the road at her back. She could remember scrawling out a cryptic note that she'd left on her faculty secretary's desk, and instructions for her neighbour on how often to feed her cat. She'd packed badly, bringing only one pair of jeans, and a backpack half full of the novels she'd promised she would read when she'd finished her thesis. It wasn't finished, but that hadn't seemed to matter at the time.

After collecting the keys for the shack from her brother, and turning down his offer of a meal, she'd stopped at a phone-box beside the highway and called Simon, who was still at work. She could hear in his voice that his kindness was tinged with frustration at the vague nature of her plans.

'Can I visit you?' His tone was hesitant, as though he already knew her answer.

'I'm not sure... I feel like I need some space...' She hated herself for the cliché but couldn't find any better, less cowardly words. A passing log-truck made the phone-booth shake and drowned out both their voices. 'I'm sorry,' she whispered.

In the shack she looked at her face in the mirror on the wall above her bed. The same lines and freckles lay like tracks across her skin. Nothing in the books and clothes that she had scattered across the blankets suggested anything was different, or the way her life had altered. The light changed and the wind shifted direction as she sat motionless on the narrow bed. Behind her, outside the window, crowds of silver-eyes flew into the branches of a wattle. She saw them reflected around her face in the mirror, like some shimmering halo.

By the time she made her way back through the dunes the sun was already low in the sky, and a strengthening wind blew in from a bank of cloud on the eastern horizon. The ocean, below its veil of crests, turned from turquoise to grey with the altering light. In the distance, the tiny triangle of a sail moved northwards to scattered islands.

She walked, as she'd done on the previous night, towards the jetties at the furthest end of the beach. In places her footprints were still visible in the sand. Where the surf quietened, she lay back on the beach and looked out across the ocean. Leaning on her elbows, she traced the back of her hand carelessly across the sand in an elliptical motion, and several minutes passed before

she noticed the markings, and she realised her fingers were erasing a trail of words beside her in the sand.

Nieve looked down at the inscriptions by her side. Her first thought was that the writing was the secret language of some creative child, but although it wasn't legible, at least not to her, the imprinted script was sophisticated, even graceful, and she could see it wasn't written by a child's hand. Without disturbing the writing further with her feet, she stood up, and looked across the beach, then along the line of encrypted words. The carefully written symbols followed the contours of the tide-line, skirting banks of brown pebbles and strands of shell as far down the beach as she could make out in the fading light. Except for a figure in the distance, walking a dog towards the blowhole road, the beach was empty.

She looked at the writing. In places, the sand was still damp around the letters, and grains of shell and crushed glass were glistening in the winter light. Tiny crustaceans, disturbed by her movement, burrowed into the walls of what appeared to be punctuation, and the tracks of whelks and meandering gulls criss-crossed the gaps between sentences and words. Further down the beach, the surface of the sand was speckled with the weight of water drops. There were odd words caked in sun-hardened salt, and phrases flecked with yellow foam. By accident or design, silvery fish-scales were embedded in the furrows of the letters, and the deepest indentations at her feet were glittering, as though inlaid with mother-of-pearl.

Kneeling, she traced out the inscriptions with her fingers. Each letter seemed to respond naturally to the vagaries of the sand. Some shallow and crumbling, others defined, their arched lines reminded her of some ancient script or symbol, as though the writing was Phoenician, or hieroglyphic... although it wasn't that... it was something different... With a last look along the quiet beach, she sat back on the sand and hugged her knees to her chest. She stared out at the darkening surface of the water.

That night, unable to sleep, she swam. Without fear, with the naturalness of one who'd grown up by the ocean, she moved through the clear icy water like a seal. In the darkness, as she stretched out her arm, she felt her fingers brush against the fluid shape of a jelly-fish, its translucent skin pulsing and contracting with a strange internal light. Where the sea-bed dropped away, she wrapped her arms around the red buoy of a dinghy's summer mooring, curling her toes around the weed-covered rope. Clinging to the buoy, which ebbed back and forth on the incoming waves, feeling her skin slowly numb to the sensation of cold, she felt

calm in a way she hadn't felt for months. On the rock platform below the cliffs she could see the figures of two men carrying fishing rods and shining the beam of a torch into a pool. Twisting onto her back, she floated for some time with her eyes scanning the moon and the clouds above her head. Weightless, she let her body drift with the movement of the turning tide, and then dived, pushing down against the buoyancy of her wetsuit into eel-grass and schools of glistening fish.

Every day that followed, although the wind blew with full force against the coast, she went back to the beach to look for the writing. Slowly, she became familiar with the strings of ephemeral letters, with the attention they paid to the curve of the bay, and the filaments of sea-grasses spread across the sand. Sometimes in the space of a single night, the writing would appear and vanish, erased by the rush of the incoming tide, or filled in by the rhythmic gusts that swept across the beach.

Grief appears in a multitude of colours and forms. She could see that at some other time she would have searched through the library of words where she worked, to pin-down the language, or the origin of the writing, or waited through the night with a torch to uncover a writer somewhere on the sand. Rationally, she was sure if she looked she could find some prosaic explanation for the words, but something prevented her seeking answers that way.

On the coast of a ragged archipelago to the north, every seven years paper nautilus shells appeared across the beaches, washed up along the sand beneath the tidal beds, like scattered seeds, or rejected prayers. She'd spent most of her life on this island. She knew the way the ocean tossed up flotsam and jetsam from uncharted places, and how the waves offered odd and precious gifts... the skeleton of a seahorse... words sealed in a bottle...

After the wind had dropped away, on a morning when the clouds swelled and settled on the cliffs, she found a feather like the quill of a pen in the dunes. Walking down to the water, she gathered the remnants of her secret, like some frayed twist of rope or the fragile pieces of a broken shell, and wrote steadily in the sand above the solitary words.

\*

Before he left Iran he had been to the shores of the Caspian Sea but had never seen the ocean. For three months he'd been working in the isthmus café, where Angus had taught him to froth milk into foam, and how to balance plates along his wrists as he walked. He slept upstairs in a room filled with telephone books and antique clocks, and bought warm, ill-fitting clothes from a second-hand shop in the city. He'd known Angus, first by letters and later by calls, through a charity who visited the compound where he'd spent his first years in Australia. He remembered the shock of the cold when he'd reached Hobart airport in the driving rain, and the warmth of this ungainly man with the reddest hair and whitest skin who came out to meet him, who took him into his home and offered him work.

Through the winter, when business was quiet, they'd build a fire or sit out on the veranda in the wind, listening to the sound of the surf as it broke across the coast. They'd often spend hours avoiding work, Amir sharpening his English, Angus smoking the plants he grew in the scrub behind the kitchen, repeating long, tangential stories about the people who'd passed through the town. They had the kind of gentle, unlikely friendship of the lonely. When Amir spoke of his past, Angus would put down his glass and listen thoughtfully, asking only the occasional question. For Amir, although English still felt awkward on his tongue, there was something about shaping his memories into patterns that helped him to sift through the pain of his past. The phrases clutched hold of his drifting thoughts like the arms of a fisherman, hauling him from the surf.

After two years in detention he had an aversion to closed doors. Some days, when Angus travelled into the city for supplies, he opened the windows and doors of the café and let the wind and the sand and the bracken blow in. At the end of the day, he took a mop and a broom and swept every surface. He scoured the coffee machine and the tiled floors and polished each pane of the lead-light glass. Angus, arriving late to find the café gleaming, the candle-wicks trimmed and everything in perfect order, would admire Amir's dedication to cleanliness, and found it odd when the customers complained of grittiness in their filled baguettes, or when the black keys of the piano would seize up with salt and sand.

In a bid to develop his English, and his understanding of the place he'd come to only by chance, Angus gave him history books and poetry to read when the café was empty. He waded through the sagas of the convicts whose thumb-imprinted bricks had built the foundations of the town. It seemed a strange and ghostly irony that at one time a line of chained dogs, and the ocean itself, had made the peninsula he'd come to a prison. By reading he learned about the Palawa people who once inhabited the forest, who left behind glittering middens of shell and bone under the she-oaks that fringed the coast. He thought of the strength of their belonging, and



their loss, with an uneasy, empathetic envy. The meandering, rhythmic words they used to name their home were as foreign to him as the Tasmanian sky, which altered with the seconds. Under the noise of the coffee machine he practised the names of the animals he'd seen grazing in the shadows at dusk – “wallaby, paddymelon, wombat, potoroo...” – lovely, vowel-heavy words that he dreamed he would one day teach his daughter. The clumsiness of his pronunciation made Angus laugh.

Although his licence had not yet been approved, he borrowed Angus's van and followed the back roads and forestry tracks, as though trying to pace out the borders of his new home. He found old farms overgrown with blackberries and bracken, their paddocks strewn with rusted-out cars, and abandoned orchards where sugary apples lay rotting on the ground. There was a crescent-shaped beach with the name of a French explorer, where the water was as clear as a diamond. Alone, he found the beauty and silence of such places difficult to endure. It was only amongst friends or tourists, who seemed to dull down intensity with their cameras and their travel-weary gazes, that he was able to relax. Later on, among the paperbacks that Angus had given him, he would discover the poetry that conjured these landscapes with words he'd carry with him like lamp-light. But at that time, the sea was still a stranger to him.

On a clear afternoon, he and Angus walked with fishing rods and gumboots out onto a point, painted pale green and yellow with lichen, which transformed into an island with the rising tide. They sat in the sunlight above the water, on a flat rock strewn with fish bones and abalone shell. The ground was covered with the white droppings of domenican gulls and soft, grey feathers. Further back from the sea, fire-blackened rocks and broken bottles betrayed a favourite fishing spot.

The night before, in front of the fire, he'd practised tying knots and threading bait securely onto each of a collection of hooks in various styles and sizes. He watched as Angus, observing the direction of the breeze and the action of the swell, moved from rock to rock before settling on the perfect spot for his bucket and the small, blue eski they'd filled with cold beer and last week's prosciutto for bait. He tried to copy the way Angus stood on the rock as he cast out. On his first few attempts his sinker caught in the casuarinas behind him, or tangled in the eel-grass that grew in banks beneath the rocks. They waited in silence and watched as ripples appeared

on the surface by Angus's lure. A flock of black, yellow-tailed cockatoos flew down from the hills into the wattles on the cliffs. A handful of terns skimmed the water nearby.

The first fish Angus caught was slender and black; it was undersized, and slipped off the hook before Angus had the chance to throw it back into the water. The second was a leather-jacket, with dark green fins and scales that shone like rainbows in certain angles of light. Amir put down his rod and crouched on the rocks to watch as Angus deftly twisted the hook free from the creature's lip. Taking a knife from the bucket with his left hand as he gripped the still struggling fish with his right, he held it by the tail against the flattest face of the boulder by his side, and pushed the knife between the bones of its glossy head. As quickly as the fish had appeared from the sea, it stopped quivering, its gills lay open and still. Without looking up, Angus rinsed it with the blade in a shallow pool where Amir had stood, and dropped the fish onto the ice in the eski. Opening a second beer, he washed the lines of blood from his wrist before re-threading the newly-christened hook.

Several times Amir felt the teasing tug of something nibbling his bait. By the time he pulled his first fish from the sea, it was close to twilight, and the ocean below them was crowded with noisy, scavenging birds. On his hook was a puffer-fish, an ugly, inedible creature that filled its body with air like an inflated balloon as it was lifted into the light. Relishing the moment, and unsure what to do next, Amir let it swing awkwardly from the end of his line while Angus cheered and clapped.

The ocean began to change. To the south, on one of his drives he came across a lighthouse, perched on a precipice, high above the sea. On clear nights, he could just make out its pale halo in the sky above the cliffs. He loved to watch it signal, out across the water. There was something unearthly about it, as though the combination of intermittent light and dark could communicate something unknowable, with somewhere unknown.

For a long time, Amir barely thought of his past or his future. In the compound in the desert, he'd tried to occupy his mind by teaching English to the other Iranians. He'd written letters to his daughter, Ishala, but had never received a reply. He knew that they were intercepted, that the secret police, the Sepah, pawed over each syllable of those whispered thoughts.

On sleepless nights, he took the gold-leafed sketchbook he'd been given by a stranger on the steps of the courthouse in Perth, and imagined the faces of his friends and of his freckled, lovely daughter. His drawing was clumsy, the lines never seeming to fall on the page the way he willed them to do. So he began to remember their faces in words.

It was a Wednesday morning, before a south-easterly lashed the coast with squalls of rain, when he first noticed her in the café. She leant her bike against the railing of the balcony by the door, and let her dark hair fall across her face like a veil. He watched the way she turned her cup in unconscious circles as she drank, the way she searched the pockets of her clothes for animals curled into silver coins. He noticed the books in a pile on her table, the way her fingers lead her eyes along the lines as she read. She wore a thread-bare blue cardigan pushed up above her elbows. He wondered briefly why she was alone.

The first time he wrote on the beach, he let memories drift into his head as he walked and his visions turn first into sand, and then words. He wrote to Ishala. His writing looked strange and perfect. He sat by the ocean for hours and watched as the water flowed into the letters, flooding each line and impression until they had vanished under the tide. The writing dissolved into water and sand.

The days grew colder. He slept under layers of blankets and quilts, and returned to the ocean, as a ritual, to write. He lay awake at night and imagined his letters caught up in a current that streamed across the globe, or clinging to the body of some migrating creature, like the wrasse he'd seen photographed in Angus's books. He dreamt of Ishala laughing and running on the shore of an un-named ocean, with words and pictures tangling like drifting weeds around her feet.

When rain clouds settled on the ranges to the south, he followed the sealed road out onto the headland. The cafe had been busy, and it had been several days since he'd written on the beach. He felt listless. A flock of young pacific gulls reluctantly lifted off the shore as he passed. Moving away from the rocks, he wandered out onto the open sand of the isthmus. Ahead of him, above the rising tide, he could just make out the markings that he thought were the remnants of his writing. With some surprise that anything had lasted this long through the weather, he moved further down the beach, quickening his step just a little, and focusing more

intently on the sand before him as he walked. He felt his heart pounding heavily in his chest, and filled his lungs with slow, deliberate breaths. In front of him, in place of his own writing, there was a line of cursive scrawled above the water, which was rising, and already only inches from his feet. He looked across the wide bay. It was beginning to rain, and he saw no-one on the sand or on the rocks where he'd walked. He tried to focus on the disappearing words. Although they appeared to be written in English, the letters angled towards the cliffs and he found their meaning impossible to decipher. Each new wave washed away a section of the writing. He waded into the water to look directly down on the words. His wet jeans clung to his legs; sea wrack caught around the laces of his boots.

It was over so quickly. When the tide had passed, he crouched on the beach and tried to wring the water from his soaking clothes. Shivering, his skin stinging with salt, he stood up and started to walk in the direction of the café. As he walked, he closed his eyes and pictured the white streets of his home. He couldn't bring himself to look at the sea.

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As time passed, Amir began to learn the rhythms of the ocean: to anticipate the lull at the turn of the tide, the way the waves seemed to falter in the moments before falling. He never knew when the writing would appear on the beach. Sometimes, the new words entangled with his, like tendrils of kelp on the dampened sand. They ran in parallel and then moved apart, first turning and now dissolving under the lip of the foaming sea. There were times when the writings would alternate, like a dialogue, and days when the beach remained empty, when the only words were written in the wandering prints of the birds. He woke early, and could read from the sky when the sand would be silken like paper, tell the clouded nights when the beach was as supple and pale as the limbs of a child. In the mornings, he knew where the dunes would be wrinkled with tracks from the previous night. He heard words that he imagined on the lips of his daughter, and spelled them out under his breath as he wrote them in the sand.

## Stillness, Smallness

1. Tasmanian Waratah, *Telopea truncata*: *telopea*,  
from the Greek *telopos*, meaning ‘seen from afar.’

The nectar is clear, like water. Overnight, beaded drops form among the stems of the tangled inflorescence. Scattered, clinging drops which catch and reflect the early light. March collects them with an eye-dropper, syringing the sticky liquid into a vial. She resists the temptation to lean in to the curve of the petals with the tip of her tongue. It is how she’d introduced Nick to the taste of the nectar, under columns of dolerite on the mountain’s face. After that, whenever she’d turned around she’d seen his square jaw buried in a glistening flower.

The waratah grow across the upper slopes of the mountain, among boulders and ochre-skinned gums. To reach them she follows an overgrown track, which extends beyond the end of the farm to a plateau, and clusters of pine-circled tarns. There are platypus there – emboldened by the half-light – over-turning stones in the tannin-coloured pools, dark backs jewelled with water.

She leaves before dawn to make the climb. Nick, who has spent the night observing and has not long been in bed, stretches out across the mattress and sighs, but doesn’t wake. In the kitchen, Bosun coils his inky tail around her legs. When she opens the door, he disappears into the dark. He sits on the roof and watches as she picks her way between the she-oaks towards the truck.

Because of the nature of the trees – the cherries coastal, the *telopea* in the mountains – the farm is long and thin. At its narrowest, it is less than the width of a road. She leaves the ute where the walking track clings to the perimeter of an old, protected forest, where the trees grow taller than many of the buildings in the city they had left. The scrub is thick enough here to enable her to forget the cleared swathe of land that extends to the west.

March breathes in the cold, the moss-scented night. Above her, the first calls of the waking birds echo through the forest. The canopy of stars is fading now. She searches the sky to the south for the diagonal belt of Orion, trying to trace a mental line between the brightest points of light. On their first night on the farm, they lay on the jetty and mapped out their new future

under those stars. It's an island – small enough, large enough – to make anything possible, they'd said.

Nick tries to teach her the names of constellations. He explains to her the trajectory of the magellanic cloud that hovers over the garden, and the phenomenon behind the beams of light that turn the black ocean horizon green. He is a good teacher, and he draws diagrams on the trunks of trees and in the sand at the end of the beach. But they are ideas she has never been able to hold for long in her head.

Once the track reaches the ridge-line, it dips down to the creek, and traverses a swaying tussock-grass plain. Beyond it, she can see the crimson flowers against a backdrop of dolerite scree. It is a good year, better than their first on the farm. As she crosses the plain she counts aloud the number of buds on the largest tree.

To reach the first group of flowers she has to scramble half-way up the face of a boulder. The climbing is easy. As she moves, white lichen crumbles under the toes of her boots. Once she's within easy reach of the trees, she adjusts her balance and looks over her shoulder, scanning the length of the path to the tree-line, and the smoke-pale blue of the sea below. Nick had fallen in love with this view, the first time they climbed into the hills above the farm. On a clear day you can see the whole southern half of the island, and the smaller islands, scattered over the waves. For March, though, the real beauty came on days when the low cloud crept into the wattle-filled gullies, and lay across the ocean like a blanket.

The air is already vibrating with wings. She brushes something small and clinging off her shoulder. Behind her, above the shimmering tops of the gums, is the outcrop of rock where Nick sometimes works. It's the only point on the filament of land where he can easily communicate with the rest of the world. On sleepless nights – in the weeks when he's not doing the long commute to the telescope, which sits among the farms to the north – he talks with colleagues in Chile, in Paris. When he gets back to the house, before he climbs into bed he leaves messages for March on the blackboard by the door.

'No buds yet. No sleep. Faint aurora. Jean-Phillipe sends regards.'

When March wakes, late at night, and he isn't there, she thinks of the glow of his laptop on the mountain, his head-torch on the track and the head-lights of the ute, like satellites orbiting the island. She remembers the life that she'd longed for before they'd decided to leave the city. When he is there, she reaches out across the bed and imagines ways to pin him down.

‘If we have a child...’ She whispers. ‘Will you stay?’

He rolls over, and buries his face in her hair.

‘But it’s you who’s always moving, not me.’ Stroking her neck. ‘And I don’t know that children are still, anyway.’

‘Are we happy, do you think?’

‘Yes.’

The harvested nectar lasts for three or four days. It cannot be bottled or frozen. The quantities are so small she doesn’t move it from the vials. Nick watches her arranging them in rows in the cold-store, each carefully sealed and labelled.

‘I’ve been asked to give a paper, in Hawaii, in June.’

‘Oh, fantastic!’ She leans over to the table and kisses him lightly on the cheek, his skin still damp from the shower. ‘On that same planet?’

Nick nods.

‘That’s great. And we can put in those fruit trees, once you’re back.’

‘Sure. Would you like to come with me?’

March shrugs, and turns back to the collection on the shelf.

‘Perhaps.’ She says. ‘June seems so far away.’

2. Native Cherry, *Exoxarpus cupressiformis*: *exocarpus*,  
from the Greek, *exeo*, meaning ‘outside’ and *carpus*, meaning ‘fruit.’

The farm reaches the ocean at the island’s end. The coastline is sandstone, and the vegetation sparse. There’s no shelter from the sometimes relentless ocean winds. It can be beautiful, though, the icy water azure blue and the sky awash with gulls, with stars.

Before harvesting the cherries, March takes the dinghy across the mussel-fringed shallows to the island with the light. It’s a passage she has made many times before. While Nick had been observing, through the winter, her visits to the lighthouse filled a void of human contact. She knows to stay north of the kelp-darkened shoals where the swells rise in even the slightest breeze, and the position of the under-water beams of the jetty that used to service the lighthouse, on the deep side of the point. As she rows, she feels her body relax into the now familiar rhythm. She listens to the sound of the timber oars as they submerge, then lift, from the water, the low creak of the rowlocks on every stroke, the bow wave faltering under the hull.

When she steps from the dinghy she sees him, in the garden, above the blue stone of the dunes. Luke is kneeling over a plot behind the salt-white house, burying the roots of seedlings in the cool damp of the soil. He looks up as she drags the boat over the kelp, smiling as he stands and pulls off his gloves and pushes his beanie off his forehead.

‘How’s things?’

‘Good.’ The wind blows her hair across her face as she crouches and rolls down the cuffs of her jeans. The morning is cold, and her feet are bare. ‘I’m just starting the cherries.’

‘Great. Many fruit?’

‘Yeah. They look good.’

‘And the timing?’

‘Almost perfect.’

They watch in silence as a pair of oyster-catchers trace out the circular path of the light, and descend towards the reef. The low sun flickers off the water. He shows her the tomatoes he planted in the spring, drooping now with the weight of ripening fruit.

‘How’s Nick? I haven’t seen him about.’

‘He’s fine. His work is going so well...’ She smiles. ‘They’re in the middle of some galactic event.’ She steps away from him, and looks down at the staked rows of berries and the knots he has tied around the sun-bleached wood. ‘To be honest, we barely seem to collide these days.’

‘Maybe you need a smaller island.’

*This is enough.* In the boat she says the words aloud. A cormorant breaks the surface then dives, within a breath. *Don’t go back. This is enough.*

\*

At the beginning, the cherry trees are parasites, they feed off the roots of eucalypts to get established in the unforgiving soil. Soft, green needles weigh down the branches and carpet the sloping ground below. When they’re ripe, the fruit fall from the tree into her fingers. She doesn’t remove the peppery seed until they are ready for the tarts. The ripe fruit, though smaller than a finger tip, are as bright as the waratah’s scarlet flowers.

As she picks, March steps into the foliage of the tree. Plump fruit, overlooked by the green rosellas she’d seen sifting through the trees as she tied up the boat, are hidden under the leaves. The branches are pliant, they bend beneath her weight. They smell of earth and feathers.



It's a particular kind of pleasure she feels, gathering fruit in the embrace of these trees. She runs her forefinger over the calloused bark, and thinks of the people who once inhabited this coast, who crushed the needles to sterilise cuts and burns, and milked sap from the trunk to heal snake-bite. Later, when she carried a jar of the cherries and a bottle of their neighbour's new wine up to Nick, he told her it was the same way he felt about the sky.

She takes his hand as she hauls herself up onto the ledge where he is working. His laptop is still open, and from where she sits the screen is a mirror of violet sky.

'But stars...' she says. 'They're distant. Berries you can touch...and taste.'

'Sure.' Nick scatters the last of the cherries' hard green seeds into the canopy of the trees, and closes the lid of the laptop. 'But I don't feel that distance in the same way you do.' March pulls off her boots and stretches her leg across the empty space between them, navigating her foot into the warmth under his coat. Below them, a flock of currawongs materialise from the gully, calling as they fly.

'I saw Luke today, at the lighthouse.' She clears her throat.

'You went over there? How's he doing?'

'Good. He seems good.... It must be lonely though, that life.'

'Not much different from yours.'

As he kisses her neck, she lies perfectly still. The sky is framed by the fingers of ferns and the coiled springs of pandani.

'Why do you think you came here?' She asks.

'To be with you.'

'Nick...'

'You know why, March.'

After, they lay together, their bodies curled into a knot under the blanket of coats, the warmth of their skin seeping into the rock. *Surely this is happiness?* She closes her eyes and breathes in the salt smell of his shoulder, the damp of the moss and the sap of the thin green eucalypts, twisting between the rocks. She rolls over, props herself up on her elbows, and looks down at the familiar map of his face.

'In three weeks I'll be in Paris...' He says, and she can tell by the way he chooses his words and watches the clouds, that he's already left.

\*

The weatherboard kitchen is warm from the heat of the wood-fuelled stove, the rust-sealed windows opaque with steam. March dusts the table with a thin film of flour, and cuts a slab of chilled butter into a bowl. Slowly, she works the butter into the flour with her fingers, and feels the dough come together into a ball. To shape it, she uses the rolling pin she had found in the cupboard when they first moved in, a smooth, clear limb of huon pine. Once the pastry is rolled, she cuts out the cases with a small, circular mould. After pressing them gently into indented trays, she lines each one with paper and dried lima beans, and slides them into the oven.

Outside, a lid of cloud holds in the night. She stands on the verandah, her back against the peeling timber wall. Beyond the trees, she can see the intermittent glow of the lighthouse, casting out across the water. She follows the arc of the beam across the swell, and imagines climbing inside that hemisphere of light.

When the pastry is cool, she takes a bowl of seeded cherries and distributes them evenly between the shells, using the eye-dropper to glaze them with the nectar. One day, she will sell the finished tarts herself, at their quiet local market, but for now, they are packed in refrigerated crates and flown to the restaurants of Sydney and Japan. She'll put one aside, though, and when Nick is home they'll share a bottle of wine and eat it together. She picks it up – the red fruit glowing within the nest of golden pastry – and holds it steady, the smallest island, in the ocean of her palm.

## River Water

*Every day the colour changes. In the winter, when the rains fall on the mountains to the west, it is dark, almost black against the base of the cliff. It is seductive, this water, brimming with danger. It is ice cold and refuses to hold the weight of your body. It clutches your reflection and drags it down. Its stories are old and secret. It is into this water that she imagines the Enchantress disappeared, and this water, where she had first seen him swim.*

At dusk she sits out on the balcony once Ruby sleeps, and watches as Aquila cuts across the skin of the darkening water. Sometimes she sees him too, in the shallows beneath the cliffs. He is hunting morwong across the reef, or quivering back and forth over a sting-ray on the sea-bed. His silhouette is black and sleek against the silver of the water. She watches his body twist and dive with quick, mercurial grace, and feels a kind of yearning that she can't yet name.

It isn't always him she sees. There are other seals along this coast. At the fish farm they're considered pests, the enemy. A single seal can kill one hundred salmon in a single night in a pen. Once they are full of flesh they bite out their livers and leave the glistening fish to rot. For Arran, a significant amount of each day's work is spent releasing seals who have made themselves too fat to fit through the holes in the nets they made the previous night. In the morning, they bask on the collar in the sun and listen for the sound of his boat. Occasionally, a group of seals is legally 'relocated.' They're driven to the East Coast in the back of a ute. There are also darker stories, but not ones he shares with his wife.

\*

This is where they live, in a shack on the cliffs, where dolerite carves through the sandstone coast and eucalypts tumble one by one into the sea. It's not an old shack, but the banksia scrub that surrounds it scrapes against the windows at night, and the sound of the swell on the beach to the north travels easily through the uninsulated walls. She feels uneasy sometimes, so close to the cliff. At low tides, when they scramble across the exposed rock-shore, they find new boulders and the collapsed limbs of trees that stood defiant on the cliff-edge the previous night. As though the arms of the sea were trying to reach up and snatch them from their impermanent home.

Their first summer is cool and fickle. There are mornings spent shoulder deep in the water of the bay with Ruby in her arms. She marvels at how quickly Ruby learns to love the water, how her fear evaporates almost overnight, and is replaced by disarming bravado. There are still days when the air is baking hot and the water clear like yellow glass, and many more when the southerlies lash across the beach and carpet the sand with uprooted kelp and she longs for the monotonous heat of the West.

Arran works 14 hour shifts on the river. He leaves before dawn and at dusk she watches Aquila's navigation lights arc across the entrance to the bay. He paddles ashore by kayak and walks home along the deserted beach. When he gets to the house he smells of fish and his waterproof jacket is crusted with salt. At these times, when his face is lit by light off the water and the memory of sun, she can barely remember those days in Perth, when their lives had begun to change. They had not known then that the pain that gripped his body during long hours at a computer desk would stay with them, or that the creature that attached itself to his back – the ashen figure of flaking stone that wrapped itself around his shoulders and neck, which kicked its feet against the small of his back – would move into their house, and sleep in their bed.

\*

Ruby is running. Arms held wide like flightless wings, she traces out the tide-line. On the beach, her running has an air of wild freedom. She takes small, rapid, rhythmic steps that cover a surprising amount of ground. She has just had her second birthday, her legs are still chubby like a cherub's, and she's wearing gumboots on the beach as the sand is bitterly, unseasonably cold. Her hair, a tangle of kelp-coloured curls, streams out behind her as she moves, collecting sand and knots of grass like a seabird feathering a nest. From time to time she stops and turns to make sure her mother's still following behind, or trips on a piece of driftwood and falls flat across the sand, but is quickly on her feet, scattering around her fistfuls of beach, and running again.

It has been raining for three days. The creek that flows out of the wetlands is in flood and the sea is red with the tannin. The beach has been strikingly altered by the storm. All along the sand, driftwood and other flotsam are tangled through thickets of crab infested kelp. Shoals of heart-urchins scoured from the seabed mark the highest reach of the swell. In the water, the trunks of vast, fallen trees roll back and forth in the shallows. Beside the stream that flows out

of the wetlands behind the road, an old crack willow lies across the sand, washed in from some bank of the Huon. Handfuls of leaves are still clinging to its branches. It looks resilient, an environmental weed which seems as though it could readily take root and thrive right there at the edge of the sea.

She has been here long enough to know that each storm alters the beach in a different way. There are gales from the south which expose the shoals of pebbles at alternating ends of the bay, which steel the soil from the roots of the gums that fringe the western corner of the beach. The swells which have travelled the cold southern ocean scour back the life of the seabed. They carry the discarded shells of large spider crabs and violet, spine covered urchins. Below the tide-line are strands of dismembered purple stars and obscene, flesh coloured sea cucumbers. Ghost nets, old buoys and rafts of knotted timber rise and fall on the crests of the surf.

She has realised since they came here that in the past she thought, naively, of the beach as somehow constant, and had taken comfort in that. Instead she found a place of extraordinary movement. There is ebb and flow but there is also something more sinister, more ineluctable than the normal pattern of seasons and storms that is scouring back their coast.

As she walks behind her daughter, who has left a trail of tiny footprints above the lick of the waves, she thinks about how she will tackle their garden with its unyielding soil and low shrubs bent and stunted by the wind. She has all sorts of plans for a berry patch and an orchard of figs and apples, but among the bush trees are scattered the rotting remains of previous plantings. When she and Ruby started digging their vegetable patch they found faded tags printed with the latin names of sweet-scented, exotic trees. Tiny, plastic epitaphs to other gardeners' dreams. Despite this, she loves the noise of the possums who climb the lattice to their balcony each night, and the dark shapes of the marsupials who graze across the terraced slopes. She shudders at the thought that they'll find their way over the charged wire and barbs of her neighbour's fence, and into the range of his shotgun.

At first, she thinks he is drowning. Ruby has stopped running and turned towards the sea, she hasn't noticed how far down the beach she has moved, or the waves that lap around the heels of her boots. In front of her, just beyond the break, she can see someone trying to tread water. The figure disappears for a moment under the foam, re-surfaces, and then vanishes again. *It's a*

*child. A boy.* The water around him is turbulent and several metres deep. He tilts back his chin as though gasping for air. The surf breaks relentlessly over his head. Sarah starts to run. When she reaches Ruby she grabs her by the shoulders and hauls her away from the sea. Placing her firmly down on the sand, she takes a step towards the waves, watching the barely visible figure.

‘Ruby!’ Her voice half swallowed by the wind. Her daughter holds out her arms and starts to run down the beach towards her.

‘Carry me now, mummy!?’ She calls.

‘I need you to stay there, darling!’ She is breathless. ‘Just stay on the sand and don’t follow me! I need to go into the water....to go swimming. I’ll come back very soon, all-right? I’m not sure if that boy out there needs our help.... I think he needs our help.’

She pulls off her boots and wades into the water. It is icy, this darkened ocean, and infinitely different from the one she swam in only days before. She is almost up to her waist when the boy disappears beneath the swell once more. A late cresting wave knocks her off her feet and sweeps her backwards towards the beach. She is a strong swimmer, but the surf is unpredictable. It fills her ears and nose and something stings her skin and lashes across her throat. When she regains her footing she spits out a mouthful of sand. She knows she’ll have to dive in order to get through the worst of the breakers. But before she lifts her feet from the bottom, she glances back to the beach where Ruby is waiting. Her daughter hasn’t moved but has dropped her plastic bucket and it’s rolling down the beach towards the waves. *She will chase it.* Even as the thought passes through her head Sarah watches in horror as her daughter’s eyes lock onto the bucket. Calling and pointing, she throws down her spade and starts to run towards the water.

‘Stay there Ruby! Stay on the beach!’ Her voice is lost under the roar of the surf. She looks back to where the boy is still submerged – it has been minutes since she saw him – and feels as though her body is being ripped in two. In the place where he had been the surf continues to break, and there is nothing to show he was ever even there. She turns, the bucket has reached the sea and is being washed further and further from the shore. Ruby is crying as her boots fill with water, but she keeps struggling determinedly after the bucket until she falls onto her hands and knees and splutters as the salt water fills her throat.

When she reaches her daughter and scoops her out of the sea she can feel herself violently shivering. She thinks of the last time she’d felt so cold - lying on a trolley in a surgical ward after Ruby had been delivered. She remembered how helpless she’d felt, unable to speak and shuddering with cold under a useless cotton blanket after losing too much blood. How afraid she’d been that the trembling would keep her from holding her newborn daughter.

‘We’ll light a fire at home.’ Sarah’s lips feel numb as she whispers into Ruby’s sand-

matted hair. 'We'll be warm there, ok?'

'My bucket?' Ruby whimpers, when her coughing finally stops.

'Oh darling...' She knows she should stay there on the beach, but her phone's at the house and there is no-one in sight. She keeps her back to the waves and for a moment can't muster the strength to look over her shoulder at the sea.

'This yours?' The voice from behind her makes her jump and Ruby starts to cry once more. *A child's voice.* He is standing on the edge of the water and he's holding Ruby's bucket. His skin is as pale as the sand where he stands and he's dripping wet but showing no sign of cold. Sarah stares at him, unable to speak. Ruby, sensing her mother's shock, increases the volume of her crying, and struggles to free herself from Sarah's arms.

'You -' Sarah stammers. 'You're...? But...I thought you were drowning?! You went under...?' The boy shrugs his shoulders and stays silent. 'You were swimming.' As she utters the words she feels suddenly absurd. She thinks she should be angry, but can feel Ruby's body start to tremble in her arms. 'I need to get my daughter home' she says. 'I suppose you have a towel?...And clothes?' The boy nods and, placing the bucket on the sand, turns and dives back into the sea.

A year ago she would have told him, she thinks, as Arran hangs his Stormy in the hall. It's still raining, and after hugging her he starts pulling off his soaking clothes and heads for the warmth of the shower. Since the pain began they have learned to steer their conversations along the simplest paths. Words have shortened and vanished, one by one. As she slices carrots and bacon for soup she feels them settle on her lips now and then. She turns towards Arran who has stretched across the couch, but she can tell by the way he holds his neck and the tension in his face that the pain is bad. While she cooks he occasionally talks about work and the seal he had to free from one of the nets.

'It's always the same seal on that lease.'

She feels guilty. He'd want to know about Ruby.

'It's a young one, but he must be 200 kilos.'

'Was it hard to get him out?' She peels the skin from an onion and tries not to notice the figure that has wound itself around her husband's neck. It's so familiar now, this ashen thing. She has lain awake beside it in bed, watching its long and sinewed fingers tug across the muscles of his back.

'Not really.' He lifts his head slightly and deliberately cracks his neck. 'The hard bit is keeping out of the way once you do – they're incredibly quick.' Ruby climbs up beside him on

the couch with a wooden train in her hand. She can't see the creature on her father's back, Sarah thinks, but she wonders if she'll begin to, in time. Arran lifts his daughter above his chest and she flaps her arms and squeals with delight. 'What did you do today, Ruby blue?'

'Played at the beach...' Ruby says. 'And Mummy went in the water.' She rolls the train across her father's chest, and her smile disappears. 'We saw a boy. I lost my bucket...' Arran looks inquisitively at Sarah.

'You went swimming?' Her story seems ridiculous now.

'There was a boy in the surf, and I thought at first he might be in trouble.' She keeps her eyes on the onion. 'I started to wade into the water but it turned out he was fine. I guess I over-reacted. He must've thought I was mad.'

'Sounds a bit dramatic. Weren't his parents around?'

'Not that I saw.' There weren't parents, she thinks.

'Pretty crazy – swimming in weather like this. You must have been worried to go in the water? It was hard enough landing the kayak.'

'It was the biggest surf I've seen here,' she says. 'He kept going under... But I guess it was just a weird kind of swimming style... He seemed a little on the odd side actually. I suppose he'd come down from a shack on his own.' She turns and slides the onion from the board into a pan of smoking oil.

Once in a while, she makes tentative attempts to make inroads into the community. She has taken Ruby to a playgroup in a reclaimed church hall where the apple road passes through Cygnet. There is a wordless connection between the parents of young children, a shared blend of exhaustion and pride. But most of the women seem easier with motherhood than she has ever felt. For the first lonely months in that town she finds herself clinging to the lifebuoy of small-talk, and can no longer remember how it was she made friends.

Pain brought them here. It chooses how they spend their days, where they go, and how long they stay where they do. It creeps its way into their whispered conversations, and drags in their horizons like the corners of a net. It had entered their child's vocabulary in the first months that she learned to talk. Sarah felt her stomach knot each time she heard one of Ruby's tiny people say that their backs were hurting, in her imaginative games. The small, secret games where she acted out what excited or confused her, and where she wove stories from her parents' mistakes.



The second time they saw him was an autumn day when the sky was smeared with the ochre smoke of forestry fires. In the morning, the tide was low and the sun spilled across the golden rock at the eastern end of the bay. The sandstone platform below the shack was perforated with deep clear pools. Ruby, with bucket in hand was crouched over a circle of uprooted sea-stars.

‘They’ll be right there, for a minute’ she whispers assuredly as she arranges them on the edge of a grass-flecked pool. Their delicately tendrilled stomachs are crammed with the blue claws of crabs and half-digested whelks. They have an odd ability to cover distance in the pool and alter their position while your head is turned. They pile on top of each other, arms groping out as though through darkness for the dimly lit ledge where they’d been securely anchored just moments before.

Sarah skims her hand across the water and a dozen shrimps scatter towards the outer rim of the pool. Behind her, beyond the arch of the large eucalypt trunk that marks the edge of the rock, and the descent into deeper water, something breaks the surface. She turns her head slightly but there is nothing there, only vanishing ripples now metres wide. Ruby, losing interest in the sea-stars, is feeding periwinkle shells to the anemones squeezed into the fault that runs across the base of the pool.

‘I’m sorry if I worried you the other day.’ The voice is calmer and clearer than she remembered. ‘I swim a lot. And sometimes I forget that other people don’t.’ The boy, who looks like he has just stepped from the water, crouches down beside Ruby. A faint halo of water-drops forms around him on the rock.

Sarah hesitates.

‘That’s Ok... I guess I over-reacted. I just didn’t expect to see anyone in the water on such an awful day.’ The boy shrugs again, in the same careless, mildly irritating way he’d done on the beach, and squeezes the salt-water out of his hair.

‘I found star-fish’ says Ruby. ‘And some nemones and a crab.’ The boy leans over the pool and runs his fingers along the hidden face of the ledge, then fumbling for a moment, pulls a shell, not quite the length of his hand, out of the water. Holding it up for Ruby, he rolls it over so that the mouth of the shell is facing her, and a pair of weedy antennae emerge.

Ruby gasps.

‘What’s that, mummy!?’

‘It’s a hermit crab.’ He says. ‘This shell’s like its home. If we wait a bit, he’ll come out a little more and try to run away.’ He has the easy way with children that other children have. But he is not quite a child, Sarah notes, and he is taller, more muscular than he’d first seemed on

the beach.

‘Do you live around here?’ She asks.

‘Yeah.’ Without letting go, he dips the hermit crab back in the water, and then offers it to Ruby. ‘Want to hold him?’ Ruby shakes her head and takes a step backwards before reaching out to touch the shell of the animal in his hand.

‘He’s funny.’ She says smiling, and then turns back to the star-fish who are beginning to escape their pool.

‘My mum loved them.’ He looks down into the water. Sarah notices that his voice sounds like a child's voice once more. She smiles at him, and chooses not to ask about his mother, or why he referred to her in the past tense. She feels surprisingly relaxed in the company of this boy, and alters her position on the rock to feel the warmth of the sun on her back.

For a while they sit together while the boy collects shell-fish and plants to adorn Ruby's pool. Then he stands and walks towards the fallen tree and the rock ledge he must have climbed out on. He didn't say goodbye, Sarah thinks, but there's nothing particularly unusual in this, he's only a kid, after all. Ruby waves and calls out:

‘Bye boy!’ as he slides back into the sky-reflecting sea. They watch him swim away, not towards the beach as Sarah had expected, but around the coast in the direction of Black Rock. He swims slowly, with his arms submerged and only his eyes and nose above the water. He dives often, and doesn't break the surface again until the water behind him is smooth.

‘Like a fish,’ Ruby says, crouching over the pool.

These are the bad days. In the morning, the pain is most visible against his back. It is dense, like layers of dolerite across his shoulders, its riveted elbows angled taught and black into the nerves along his upper spine. It alters his face, this unrelenting creature. The lines around her husband's eyes are deepened, as though his skin has hardened like his muscles, and his body is thick and slow-moving. When it was worst, his body recoiled from even the lightest, most tender touch. It had taken her a long time to understand this physical reaction was not a rebuke, but it made her wary, and the memory of rejection eroded the intimacy their bodies once knew.

On bad days he has no tolerance for noise, for the singing of his daughter, or the radio Sarah listens to as they prepare for the day. The sound of Ruby's truck across the floorboards makes him wince. Because of this, listening to music became a clandestine, almost illicit joy. When pain left the house Sarah would help Ruby put a disc into the CD player in the kitchen, and

they'd dance. She sang and each syllable of songs so long unlistened to effortlessly formed on her tongue. When she let it, in these snatched, secret moments, the music drew her back into her past. It formed filaments to a vivid life so strong they almost made a bridge that she could cross with her daughter in her arms.

Sometimes she caught the figure reaching out its hand towards her own ankle or wrist, with a different kind of touch. Sometimes it reached for Ruby, too. When she saw it happening she'd pick up her daughter and spin her around and cover her with kisses.

She had thought about leaving. There were mornings when she looked out at the car and imagined Ruby sleeping in the back, driving a long way to somewhere warm, a city of people and noise and light. She looked out at the bay below her house, so still and silent. A glistening, perfect bay where day after day after day was waiting to pass by.

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The river is flat calm, a sheet of flawless amber. Aquila glides easily out of the bay. In the deep water close to Arch Island a trio of large seals are carelessly drifting in the sun. They lie on their backs with their flippers raised like ragged pirate flags, whiskered faces tipped back into the water, watching for predators from below.

Sarah was always shocked by their size. Salmon fed, they had been measured at twice the bodyweight expected of fur seals in the wild. These seals are so satiated with fish they barely register the boat's approach. When they are only metres away, Arran cuts the motor and they drift. From time to time the seals raise their heads to glance, coal-eyed, in Aquila's direction. Ruby grips her father's leg and leans her chin against the aluminium rail, tasting the salt with the tip of her tongue, listening to the sound of the breathing seals and the water lapping against the side of the hull.

‘You're fat,’ she whispers. ‘You've eaten Daddy's fish.’

Arran restarts the motor and the seals dive back under the water. Aquila turns her nose towards the lease where Arran had been working over winter – an eerie archipelago of black netted cages a few kilometres to the East. The boat is fast. Ruby perches on Arran's lap, clutching tightly to the cross bar of the wheel, squinting into the wind.

Sarah looks back towards the treed coast of Bruny. She'd heard a story not long after they moved into the bay, about a barque, the *Enchantress*, that had been lost off that coast. In the last days of its passage from London, the ship struck an uncharted reef in the dark, and many of the crew and passengers had drowned.

She stares down at the sea and imagines the water closing over her head. The unthinkable cold, the quiet. Weeks before, in the local paper she'd seen a photograph of a giant crab. It had been caught by a trawler off the northern coast of the island, and purchased by a London aquarium. '*Harvested at 200m,*' the article said. For days after, whenever she closed her eyes she'd pictured that ancient creature, who had lived its life at that unfathomable depth, on a plane, London bound.

'What you thinking?' Arran's voice breaks through her thoughts. They have almost reached the cages.

'About crabs.' She smiles, and Ruby giggles. Arran raises an eyebrow. He spins the wheel and throttles down, and they slow, sliding up to the side of a cage. Dozens of sea birds on both sides of the net, scatter into the air, and then resettle. They can already see the salmon, each one rivalling the size of her daughter, glittering under the water. On the far side of the cage something heavy slams itself against the side of the net.

'That's a seal,' says Arran. He spins the wheel again and they circle the cage. With the sun now behind them they can see a dozen half-eaten fish floating at the edge of the net.

'Should you let it out?' Sarah asks.

'Not sure...Probably not, they might be trapping them.'

The seal dives and the salmon splinter around the pool. When it resurfaces, it lunges towards the gate several times, before diving again. They can see the cage shaking while he is submerged, as though he's testing the strength of the underwater net.

'It looks distressed...' Sarah watches the seal and the terrified salmon swirling around the cage.

'Not really. Rod should be over here soon. He'll let it out. He'll be right.' Sensing Sarah's concern, Ruby raises her voice in alarm and looks pleadingly at Arran.

'But it's distress, Daddy! Look!' She cries. Arran reaches down and squeezes her narrow shoulders against his thigh.

'He's all right.'

Sarah crouches beside her daughter and cups her hand across her cheek. The seal surfaces so close to the boat that when it exhales she can smell its breath.

‘Someone’s coming to let him out. I’m not worried, sweetie. Dad knows what’s best.’ Aquila pulls away from the lease. Arran starts to talk about the way the fish are fed and the kind of readings and measurements they take, but all she can think of is the trapped seal, lumbering hopelessly against the side of the net.

As they travel back to the bay Ruby sits playing with a fishing lure on the floor of the boat.

‘They look intelligent, don’t you think?’

‘Yeah. They’re pretty cunning.’ Arran laughs. ‘Especially these ones. Fed on a diet of solid omega 3.’ Once the boat is on the plane he cracks his neck and twists uncomfortably in his seat. The creature she hadn’t noticed during the day has begun to solidify at the base of his back.

‘Is the pain bad?’ She asks.

‘Not really.’

‘You don’t talk about it much. You know you can, right?’

‘Yeah. I know. It’s just easier if I don’t.’

They are silent as Aquila sweeps into the bay. Sarah can just see the roof of the shack in the bush on the opposite side of the bay. A wisp of smoke from the remains of the fire snakes across the treetops.

‘You never seem to get lonely...’ She looks down at Ruby who has transformed the cavity of the upturned kayak into a house. ‘Out there on the water, on your own all day. I think I’d find that lonely.’

The sun is low now, and there are three black swans asleep on the rocks by the inlet. The rarely used yachts on their moorings rock, rigging clinking, as they approach. Sarah thinks again about the seal.

‘They look almost human, don’t you think? I can see where those old stories came from.’ Arran snorts.

‘Well, you know, there have been a couple of times... I looked at the seal, the seal looked at me...’ Laughing, Sarah takes the helm as he climbs onto the deck with the boathook and drags in the mooring’s weed-covered rope.

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In the winter, they sit in the window of the café on the main road of the town. They watch the leaves turn and fall in the park and the faces become familiar.

She came across the Enchantress again by chance, in a book of local history in the town's tiny museum. She sat Ruby on the floor beside her with a box of mica-brightened fossils and strings of pearl-green shells, and smoothed out the book to examine the ship, sinking into the fold of its spine. The Enchantress had been on route to Hobart when she'd struck the reef. The first lifeboat that was deployed reached Partridge Island, off the western coast of Bruny. At first, she remained partially submerged on the rocks, before being completely destroyed by a storm. Her reportedly wealthy cargo is still searched for by divers today.

Below the technical description of the fate of the ship, were several more personal stories. The paragraph that caught Sarah's eye was an oral account by one of the sailors who had rescued the survivors from the island. Among the passengers on board were a young couple from Kent, and their two children. The man, a clerk, was due to take up a government position in the Hobart port. When the ship struck the reef, the couple and their daughter had made it into the first lifeboat and survived. But in the chaos on the deck, and the darkness, they were unable to find their eleven year old son. When the rescue boats landed on Partridge Island the next day, it had taken three men to drag the still screaming mother away from the sea.

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The road to their home passes through a farm of lush paddocks shaded by huge blue-gums, both living and skeletal. In the months since they came here they had seen these fields filled with new lambs: tiny, stumbling creatures so vividly synonymous with the arrival of spring. She loved the unbridled pleasure they gave Ruby, when they walked up the hill behind the wetlands and sat on the blackberried edge of the fields. The white of the long dead trees and the skittish lambs against the green. She tried to remember a time when, like her daughter, she could have watched those lambs without the intake of breath.

Before she had her child she had not understood the secret physicality of motherhood. No-one had told her, how could they? But it had grown inside her with her daughter from the start. After Ruby was delivered, on the second night in the cramped room they'd shared, exhausted, she had relented and let a midwife carry her sleepless newborn up and down the hall. She remembered being woken after barely an hour by another child's cries. The fierceness of her longing for her newly absent daughter had struck her like a physical blow.

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‘It’s an egg case.’ He is above them. Sitting cross-legged on the sandstone ledge where they had left their shoes. The sun is behind him, but she can see that although he is wearing a wetsuit, his body is dry. ‘If you hold it up to the light you can see a million microscopic eggs.’

‘What’s scopic?’ Ruby asks.

‘Microscopic.’ Sarah says. ‘Very tiny, you can only see them through a microscope.’

Standing, she shades her eyes and looks up to where the boy is perched. ‘Going in?’

‘Sure. In a bit.’ He climbs down and walks over to the pool where Ruby is wobbling the moon-shaped jelly, cupped inside her hands. He leans on a rock, and dips his toes into the pool.

‘Whereabouts do you live?’ Sarah asks. ‘Do your parents have a shack?’

‘Not really. Not around here. I just come here sometimes.’ He stirs a knot of seagrass and beaded kelp around the pool with a length of driftwood. ‘I just like the water.’

Slowly, the pool returns to stillness, and for a moment the reflection of his face there in the water is perfectly clear. Sarah notices for the first time the unusual arch of his forehead and the heavy set of his nose, the startling blue-black colour of his eyes. ‘And you?’ The reflection explodes as he tosses the stick into the water.

‘We uh...we moved here.’ Sarah clears her throat. ‘Not long ago. From WA...My husband works on the river.’ She gestures towards the cages, a gappy row of teeth across the river’s mouth. Ruby, who has dropped the jelly in her bucket, starts hanging off her leg and tugging at her skirt. ‘On the fish farm.’ Now he smiles. She is not sure if he is smiling at Ruby, or at what she has just said.

‘Mummy, I’m hungry.’ Ruby is whining. Sarah picks her up, wraps her legs around her hip and loops the handle of the bucket over her wrist. She climbs up onto the ledge to retrieve their shoes and digs a half-eaten apple out of Ruby’s boot. On a whim, she turns and calls out to the boy, who is balanced now on the edge of the rock.

‘Tell your parents they’re welcome to visit. We’re number 88.’ She points across the bay. ‘On the cliffs.’ The boy nods, but doesn’t meet her eye, and turns back towards the river.

As she makes coffee, a small flock of black cockatoos circle the shack and then settle on the lower branches of the blackwood in their neighbour's vacant block. They look in through the windows, into the kitchen where she and Ruby are standing, looking back.

'Want to paint, Rubes?' She takes the art box from the cupboard in the hall, spreads an old green tarp across the table and starts to set out brushes, paper and paint. She knows that in minutes the water for the brushes will be spilled across the paper, the paint smeared and spattered across the wall. Ten minutes painting takes twenty minutes to clean, but Ruby loves it, and it gives Sarah a few moments space.

All around their home she can see the crumbled remains of Arran's pain. The dust across the floorboards like volcanic ash, shale trodden into the carpet in the hall. She drags the vacuum cleaner across the floor and tries to make it disappear. She thinks about the boy on the rocks. She knows his parents will never drop by, and she knew it at the time she'd asked. *There aren't parents.* She drops the still humming vacuum and goes over to the window. She looks out at the slate grey river through the trees. *He's alone,* she thinks. *And out there's where he lives.*

\*

Wind. There are large trees down on the beach and on the hill, and the power has been out since the morning. Ruby is sleeping, and the house is lit by oil-lamps and the fire's light.

She has learned to read the terrain of his back, in the same way she is learning the secret tracks that run between their home and the ocean. Fingers, knuckles, elbows, mouth. She knows where the muscles are knotted and taut, where they have loosened, where the skin and the nerves below have heightened sensitivity or have been surgically numbed. On his shoulder, where the pain is worst, is a heavy inked, Polynesian tattoo of a bird in flight. She runs her index finger over its wings, while her elbow seeks out the knotted muscles in the hollow below his shoulder blade. Arran flinches as she pushes the weight of her body down into the muscle. She wants to release the pressure and glide her hands over the warmth of his skin, to forget the creature that is stretched across his spine. She closes her eyes and rests her cheek against the curved small of his back, but she can feel it there, between them. As she twists her elbow it reaches out its fingers and pushes her own away.



The man who lives behind the wetlands is hauling a net into his dingy, behind the reef. The net is empty but for sea-stars and under-sized wrasse, which he tosses back into the water without ever looking up. They are walking on the beach, shoes in hand, Ruby in the oversized wetsuit she had inherited from her cousins. The still air is cool but the water is warm. Behind the arched log that rises from the shallows like the spine of a whale, the boy is sitting on the water's edge, shielding his eyes against the sun, careless of the rising tide. Ruby lets go of Sarah's hand and breaks into a run when she sees him. Sarah watches as she crouches beside him on the sand and begins to talk, though breathless. She wonders what her chatty daughter is saying as she tractors her palm across the sand by his feet.

Sarah drops their bags and kneels beside Ruby.

'Think he caught much?' She turns to look back at the boat. The boy shakes his head.

'Only small stuff. There isn't much to catch around here. Round the corner is better, less

netted I guess.'

'Do you fish?' He shrugs his shoulders and smiles as he looks down at Ruby's tunnelling, then back out towards the boat.

'Sure.'

*Don't push him*, she thinks.

'We snorkel quite a bit. In the summer, when there's less tannin.' She glances at his face in profile against the water, then shakes the sand out of Ruby's boots. 'We've seen a couple of sea-horses, loads of skates... and octopus...but nothing that big.'

'There's plenty to see if you know where to look.'

*A thousand questions.*

'You seem to know the area well...' She smiles again. 'Did you grow up here?'

'Kind of.' He draws back his wrist and skips the flat back of an oyster-shell over the water, then gets to his feet and reaches behind him for the zip-string of his wetsuit, which hung open at the back. 'I guess I know it pretty well...Never thought much of it, though.' He takes a step into the water and skims the surface with his hand. 'Coming in?'

'Sure. Give us a second.'

The sea is green like old glass. The temperature of the water on the backs of her knees makes Sarah catch her breath, but her focus on her daughter distracts her from the cold. Ruby is wearing a new inflatable ring around her middle; she sinks down and lets it float up under her arms, already buoyant from the wetsuit. Sarah wades deeper into the water. The boy is already much further out, paying no attention to the shallows.

‘Come out to me, Sweetheart.’ Ruby frowns and then raises her eyebrows in her theatrical way.

‘*Really*, mummy?’

‘Really.’ She nods. ‘The ring will help you float.’ Ruby takes a small step forward, then another. The ring floats higher, Sarah can see her pointed toes scraping the assurance of sand.

‘Hey, she’s swimming!’ Suddenly the boy is beside them and Ruby is kicking her legs and ploughing through the water. She has no ability to steer so she’s circling, heading out to sea, and she’s giggling and shouting:

‘Look at me, mummy!’ Her chin tilted back. The water behind her a swirl of rising bubbles.

‘Look at you! You’re so fast!’ Ruby kicks awkwardly towards her and throws her arms around her neck.

‘Next summer you’ll be swimming, darling girl.’ Sarah kisses her ear.

‘I am swimming, mum.’

‘Yes. You’re swimming, little daughter.’

The boy dives and circles them once under-water. When he surfaces Ruby laughs. He takes a mouthful and spits it out like a fountain. The sea-breeze stirs and makes the surface opaque, a quilt of ripples, and the boy disappears.

\*

‘Let’s go somewhere?’ Arran is already awake, the bed already warm from the first rays of sun, filtering between the slats of the timber blinds. Sarah feels the bands of light fall across her face. She thinks of the places they would have gone once – their small island a wealth of mountains, lakes and forests. Winding roads with the sky obscured by the woven branches of flowering trees, unexplored towns, small cities, waterfalls cascading into amber-laden gullies. Newness. That was what they had lost somewhere – the promise of the new. There was change here, there was always change but they were rhythmic, patterned changes.

She rolls over to face Arran. She can hear Ruby waking in the bedroom next door, gathering up an armful of toys – always just too many – turning off the white noise on the radio that seemed to calm her at night, her footsteps on the floorboards, circling the main room before turning towards their door.

‘Where were you thinking? Somewhere different?’ She asks. Ruby climbs into the bed and curls her body under the doonah between them.

Arran shrugs.

‘I’m not sure. I don’t want to drive too far.’

She can see it now, the creature, shrivelled and cruel across the tendons of his shoulder.

‘Ok.’ She swallows. Now reel off the places we can go, she tells herself. Beautiful places, so close to where we live. Secret coves, sand-flats striated with tide pools and dotted with crabs – a dusting of violet crustaceans which sink into the mud as you approach, flocks of sea-birds for Ruby to chase, wet-forest gullies, fossil-laden coves, jetties to lie on, nodding orchids, café’s in orchards, in vineyards, along the river’s edge. Familiar places which are different when the clouds are low, when rain falls, when gales lash the coast. Why can’t it be enough? Why isn’t it enough?

\*

At the water’s edge, the voices are falling away, replaced by the sound of the wind, by the lap of water on sand. Sarah swims out. She turns her back to the beach and she swims. When she reaches deep water, she fills her lungs with a single slow breath and dives, kicks down towards the sea bed. She keeps her eyes open, and watches the schools of small fish dividing and dividing again, their shadows scattering over the undulating sand. From somewhere far across the bay – she has no real sense here of distance or closeness – the low drone of an outboard travels through the green expanse of underwater. This close to the shore, the sea is milky with sand. Moon jellies and strands of transparent salps respond to the disturbance of her body. On the edge of visibility, there is the presence of the reef. Before it, branches of mustard coloured kelp unfurl out of the shadows, beckoning, pointing to the nether-world, that realm untethered to the surface. The deeper she dives, the harder it is to adjust to the dazzling, sea-refracted light. Treading water, she sinks as low as she can, her eyes and nose just above the surface. The chalk strip of the beach glinting white in the distance. For an immeasurable time she drifts like this, watching Ruby and Arren behind the waves. But when she closes her eyes and lets her body submerge, they are gone, and she is alone.

On the seabed, she can hear her own beating heart, her lungs slowly emptying of air. *This is the womb*. She pictures her daughter turning, floating in darkness, in watery green. Somewhere behind her, where the sand drops away, there is movement, a shadow passing over the reef. It is large enough to make her body brace with fear, but it’s familiar, seal-like, playful in such a way that she knows it’s not a shark. Is it a voice she can hear? Or the shudder of the swell as it rolls

across the kelp-buffered ledge? It grows louder, unrelenting until she lets go of the rock. When she surfaces, surprised by the way she finds herself gasping for breath, she can see the doll-like figures of her family over the water, still playing, spilling buckets of wet, grey sand onto the beach, filling a moat around a fortress of crumbling turrets and gull-feather masts. Once she catches her breath, Sarah starts to swim. She stretches out each forward stroke, moving quickly, easily through the water. She can sense he is still there, behind her, but she doesn't look back.

At midwinter, there is a parade of lanterns through the apple town, snaking down to the park on the main street where lights are strung from fences and trees and marionettes sail across a stage. In moments like these pain almost disappears. If she looks hard enough, she can see its shadow, like the faint outlines of the puppeteers at the edges of the curtains, as the silhouetted puppets leave their illuminated set. Music plays, and Ruby tilts her head back with joy. She shivers and dances and leans against her Dad. When the performances are over, Sarah lifts her up to gaze at the ritual lighting of the bonfire. As she turns to kiss her cheek she looks back over her shoulder at the faces of the crowd, and sees the boy, there among them with his face lit by the flames. He is dressed, he is dry, he is far from the sea. He is standing with another boy, a friend. A skateboard is tucked under his arm and they are sharing a bottle of cider. In this moment, Sarah wonders what it was that she had begun to believe about this boy. She wonders at herself, and notices the joy of the moment is tinged with inexplicable grief. With a nod in her direction, in a most un-remarkable way, the boy tucks the cider into the bag across his shoulder, and Sarah watches him walk away.

## Unravelling

*Stepping over driftwood, over untethered kelp, sea-lice scattering, light flickering off the shallows, the sand skin-like – moulded into leviathan curves. Ahead of her, in the salt haze that hangs above the surf, her father has stopped walking and is crouching over the edges of something – a stranding. Tentacles, tendrils, milky stomachs the length of the cloud-washed beach. Jellyfish never before seen on their island. Violet flesh, rotting into sea-grass, quivering, still glistening, and the water impossibly warm.*

When they reach a new town, they pull over and Mischka waits in the van or on the blackberried verge of the road, while her father strings a pair of his oldest marionettes onto the rim of the sign that carries its name. Marrawah, Lune River, Eagle-Hawk Neck. A girl and a boy – stocking-skinned and flannel shirted – the boy heavy-lidded under a sagging felt hat, the girl with wool hair gathered loosely into plaits. Sometimes she holds the ladder as he ropes the lengths of twine over the branches above; slender branches, supple so they won't crack under strain but light enough to sway in the late sea breeze. Mischka twists in her seat and watches through the rear windscreen as they drive out to the coast: those tilted, silent children, eternally smiling, arms waving slowly to the emptiness of the road, heads nodding languidly, wistfully to the trees.

Their days fall into rhythms of packing and unpacking: erecting and dismantling the weather-worn tent, rolling and unrolling the velvet of the stage, the curtains – gilded, moth-eaten. Rattling round the edges of that island, its coastline of middens and nacreous dunes; along sinewy, carrion-smeared, log-truck ridden roads, puppets swinging from hooks in the back.

In the east there is sun and sapphire water and a level of expected happiness, ease. The shells are delicate; tiny kauris, scallop shells in tangerine, saffron, rose, smaller than her finger-nail, lost inside a thimble. The shells on the west coast are more robust, they are pearly, blackened, salt-bleached. Mischka carries them from the sea in the pockets of her dress, she feels the weight of them knocking against her thighs as she walks, the salt of them dampening the cotton. As she walks she catches glimpses of the fine strands of thread running over her shoulders and back into the waves; the tendrillar, barely visible threads that her father had taught her to see. She is

careful not to let them fall into the cracks between boulders, or snag upon the wind exposed roots of the bauera, fringing the coastal track.

On the edge of the dunes, her father is standing, skin lit by the vanishing light of the sun.

‘See that swell now? Christ, the energy behind that...’

And he is gesturing – gesturing at the sea, the sky, invisible cities, faces.

There were offers of halls and theatres but her father would not take them. They set up the stage in the tinder-dry forests, in the worm-lit ventricles of limestone caves. Even on the worst of nights someone would come. The audience sat on straw-bales under water-logged tarps. Oiled coats tied at the chin and under the nose, boots deep in mud, rain like ice against the skin. There were nights when nothing could be heard but the winds roaring over the sea and through the forests. The kero lamps shivered and then went out, the small diesel generator kept a light upon the stage. After, if the numbers were low her mother let the travellers squeeze into the back of the van. She made them black tea and distracted them with her long-fingered beauty. While Mischka lay in her bunk and listened to them talk about the show and the places they’d been; their accents musical, amusing, oblique, their stories always the same.

‘Tell me about cities.’ She remembers lying in the van on that old rippled quilt, the light of a candle, her knees folded into the hollowed curve of her mother’s hip.

‘You’ll see for yourself before too long.’ Her mother blowing out the candle and settling back into the bunk. ‘They’re just so *much*. Just so many people, so many different kinds of strings... To us, to your father they’re constraints – a net. But for others those strings are a woven cloth. A support. They bounce over them, buoyant, unaware. And that world can be beautiful, Mischka, you know. That human world of mess, and knots. It can be beautiful, too. You’ll see that one day.’

Wading through rock-pools, knee-deep, ankle-deep, dim pools and mirrored sky. The moon in her hands, cupped, unmoving, spilling out over anemones and sea-lettuce beds.

‘I want to hold it.’ Then her father behind her, by the ocean.

‘Nothing can be held, sweetheart, everything is moving.’ And he’s telling the stories he’s told them before, and there are others that are new, and she listens and she feels the truth of them tightening round her chest, around her throat. And her mother: crouched beside her, skirt resting on the water, reaching into the seagrass then pressing a stone the colour of moon – a disc of white quartz – wave-polished, sun-glazed into the small of her palm, folding her fingers around it, and clutching it now with the warm blood, cold water of her own, larger hand.

In the campsites, and on the fringes of the towns there are children with faces she remembers. They hover around the lights of the puppet show like moths, skin the colour of soil, hair matted with salt. In the green light of dawn they climb into the tent with figures made of oyster shell and banksia cone; ochre-smeared, feather-legged marionettes, dangling from fish-bones and seaweed threads.

In the winter, her mother rounds up the girls among these children when they travel to the islands of the north. They scramble over dunes and scatter over the white granite beaches, and out into the crystalline strait. Buckets looped over their forearms they wade into waist deep salt-water, calling over the wave-crests like gulls, dragging up stems of rainbow kelp and the small, iridescent shellfish which are clinging to their leaves.

*Maireeners.*

‘In the old times,’ her mother told them, ‘the women of these islands pierced the shells with needles carved out of kangaroo’s teeth, and threaded them onto sinews drawn from their tails. They wove those necklaces while the world changed, while their land grew small and the shells and the women who gathered them grew sparse.’

The sea on red granite, lichen spun gold across the boulders, rolling, blood anemones groping through pools of crystallised salt. The sea is music. *Do you hear it has changed? Is it different?* Above the rock ledge the long grasses shivering, karkalla anchored in the cracks. Pigface – the sap for jack-jumper stings. He knows the names of things, the old names, the unwritten names. *Watch them carrying food – Myrmecia – building nests, scouting out threats. Under this soil there are labyrinths, tunnels.* Mischka lies on the stone and she listens to his voice. She can see them now, glittering in the sea-splintered light, suspended between the wings of terns and the bull kelp dragging on the tide-line, slung over pillows of damp moss, running through the pollen-clouds, into the canopy of the salt-withered bush.

‘Is this what they look like?’ In the fire-light, on the camp-bed, her head against her father’s knee. Mischka twists the still unthreaded end of the necklace round her fingers, over her wrist. ‘Thin, like this?’

Her father shrugs. He is tired.

‘I don’t know that they’re strings. It just feels like that to me.’

‘But they must have a name?’

‘Not in a language I know.’

In her bunk, she takes the half-threaded necklace and holds it to the light. The shells are luminous, opalescent, mother of pearl. She thinks of the fishing boat that tacked through the ocean her mother left behind. The kindness of the fishermen, the nights spent curled among the craypots, under blankets, while her father drank. Tied up at the jetty in that black-water harbour, they'd told her about the mutton-birds leaving their town – winged shadows over water – and the night that a southerly blew in the doors of the old Strahan hall, where a wedding party danced and the sky was an opal of crimson and purple, and swaying arcs of ice-riven light.

'You don't have to see everything, Mischka, you know. There are ways you can just look away, you can alter your vision.... Like the insects. Do you see them now? Look now, the air is teeming. But did you notice them before? And every leaf moving? You don't have to see it all.'

*'You know so many things, but does she need to know now? They can wait.'*

*'That's what's real.'*

*'Let her float.'*

From somewhere in the dark she can hear her mother's voice, now her father's, outside the van. Her mother's voice hushed, her father's jangling with drink. His words colliding, breath rattling with salt-water and smoke from a durrie, from the dwindling fire.

'I can see it *everywhere*.' He is saying. 'In fucking *everything* – *already*.'

'Pete...'

'They're *failing* – those connections – they're *breaking*... Can't you see it?' And he is mumbling, Mischka can't make out the words he is saying and she wants to pull the pillows down over her head, but she climbs down from the bunk and drags the blankets to the floor, and crouches silently inside the open door.

*'Everything that's perfect. Every bloody thing that was perfect.'* She can see his shoulders hunched in the light of the fire, and he is shaking and her mother has her hands on his neck, on his forehead, in his hair.

'That's God to me, Eva, that's *God*. And we've fucked it up. How do we live with that? How's she supposed to bloody live with that?'

'I don't know.'

*'What do we do?'*

'I don't know.'



At the water's edge her mother is standing, staring down into a mirror of sinking stars. Below the surface there are other lights, ignited by movement – schools of slowly gliding fish, a sting-ray grazing through the shallows.

Mischka watches her mother wade into that luminescent ocean.

‘Don’t go out far, Mamma. Just stay close in.’

And she’s nodding in the dark and calling over her shoulder:

‘I won’t, sweetheart. I won’t go out very far.’

But she is watching the sparks of bio-luminescence igniting round her calves, round her thighs. Following the movement of her body as she swims, scattering from her fingertips as she dives.

Mischka can see her now, there on the edges of her vision: peripheral, vague, youthful, tall. Dress tucked into her underwear turning cartwheels over and over on the sand – floating, defying gravity, attached to nothing at all.

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Beyond the kelp-beds, the tide pools are deep and clear. The sand is encrusted with mica fine fish-scale, glimmering in the lulls between squalls, between drifts of oiled feathers, cirrus shadows and the remains of urchin shoals. In the distance she can see them, the whales, their arched and blackened lines stark against the pale of the beach, and she remembers the ropes digging into their fins, their lifeless skins parched by the relentless summer sun, and her father’s knife working to free them, to sever the mesh lines, the ghost nets, the strangling threads.

When she reaches the clearing behind the hall, she pauses under the she-oaks to catch her breath. The twilight has faded, there is music, and the tent is encircled with clear, unwavering light. She moves closer, and crouches down behind the audience on the edges of the dark.

The stage is silent, illuminated, and the world melts away.

There is an ocean, there is an island, there is a man, there is a girl.

## It will not be Enough

It's there in the water, in the shadow of the hull. A body of clear, voluminous jelly, encasing a brain-like, orange mass. It is huge, greater than the length and breadth of your four year old body. The interior reflects the light in such a way it appears to hold its own luminescence, while below it, clouds of billowing skirts contract and expand as it passes.

I clutch hold of your shoulders as you lean from the stern. I watch your face in profile – mesmerised by the way it is swimming, quivering towards the shore. In a lifetime of sailing I've seen larger jellyfish, but none quite so impressive. I wonder what kind of age it could be? How far it has travelled? Here in these sheltered water-ways there's danger; its passage between the rocky edge of the island where we made our fire and the larger island to the east, may be its last.

Leaning from the dinghy, my niece takes a ghostly photograph. It's the one we carry with us into the CSIRO, on the urban edge of the Derwent. Later, in the park across the road, I lean on a swing as I chat to one of the resident biologists on the phone. She has an accent, Canadian perhaps? Belonging to colder oceans. She is enthusiastic and grateful and her interest is contagious. This is exciting, this creature is new to southern waters. We've seen it passing where no one has before, this beautiful, foreign thing. She spells out its name, which I scribble on my hand: *Pseudorhiza haeckelii*, she says, or Haeckel's Jellyfish.

We post the photograph on the internet, on Redmap, among the other unusual sightings. Marine life where they haven't been reported before, out of context, in un-navigated waters. An eclectic collection of aquatic pioneers. Or are they refugees? Survivors? There are many. I scroll down the images on my screen: loggerhead turtle, box jellyfish, rock cale, kingfish, the gloomy octopus we've seen hiding in the kelp beds of the bays below our home. Alongside the buoyancy of the new, a weightier, more portentous feeling.

In our bay, our snorkelling season is lengthened and shortened by the colour of the water. When the rain falls in the mountains, this river-mouth cove turns blood-red, black with tannin. This

year and the last we've swum later, the water warmer, still clear long into the autumn months. We linger on the beach with friends until bedtime, our naked children occupying the water's lapping edge. They build towers of wet sand, whelk farms, driftwood dragons. Our dogs skid in and out of the shallows, digging frantically into the crumbling foundations of castles and stick-drawn, dissolving maps. It is April, it is May, it is June and I am happy, surely this is as perfect as life will ever be?

There is something on the sand and you are nudging it with your spade, the other children crouching around you. We are coast dwellers now, collectors of fragments – storm petrel feathers and urchin spines – we know to expect the unexpected. In the history of this sand there are cetacean bones, there are giant squid washed from the deep ocean trenches, and there are footprints of brown-skinned women who carried their babies, their piccaninny children on their backs.

I think of those women, the sails on the horizon, the ocean smooth as abalone pearl. The *Recherche*, the *Esperance*, their own apocalypse in the shape of distant frigates, of trinkets left in camps on the coast of Bruny Island – *Lunnawanna-Alonnah*, *Mellukerdee*. The people who left behind the middens on the point, where the orchids unfurl their sail-like petals faithfully each Spring.

You are fascinated with the stories I tell you, with the rhythm of their words. You draw pictures on the tide-line – huts of bark, infant babies wrapped in pademelon skins. We follow long untrodden tracks through whispering she-oak forest, scented, needle-red forest. We weave ourselves into the past of this place. 'You be the mother,' you say.

What am I afraid of? That your future will be stripped of magic? Devoid of elemental beauty? There have been nights where we've huddled together on the balcony under a blanket, and watched the aurora's pale green light, swelling above the horizon. Our perfect, life-giving atmosphere protecting us from the solar wind. As we watch, you are shivering in my arms, full of questions, like those searching, incandescent beams – reaching out to somewhere beyond – something secret, unknowable, ancient. That molecular beauty that hovers over icesheets, over earth, through the pale open forest of the hills behind our home, colouring the tannin red river

that spills into this warming, acidifying ocean. It is un-corruptible, surely, that beauty? It will still be there, won't it? The colour of fire, the rhythm of waves, they will still be there?

This your world: your father's laugh, his chest, his hands, our small house, this river of rainbows, the possibility of snow.

You want to see a Thylacine – the shy, tiger-striped, bounty-ridden marsupials that once inhabited this island. I explain to you about extinction, about mistakes that were made. 'What is *shot*?' you ask, and I describe how I imagine a rifle must work, the trajectory of a bullet. You are just four years old, my daughter, and you are weeping in my arms. Humans do silly things sometimes, but lessons were learned, I tell you. How long before you realise what we are doing to this world? How long before you ask me what it means that the seasons I have taught you, which sustain us, are failing?

I've tried to use words to make a difference, but I've failed in many ways. So I will write the world for you, as it is now, as it was when I searched the sand for the surf-board skeletons of cuttlefish, as a child. I will try to weave a web of words around each vanishing species. Etch out in syllables the freckled constellations of a pardalote's weightless feathers, the silk fins of galaxias, the wild-flower tundra, the ice-bears of the frozen north. I will wrap the wings of the Ulysses butterfly and the goshawk in pages of silk, and I will try to keep them safe for you, but it will not be enough.



Human / Nature Ecotones:  
Climate Change and the Ecological Imagination



## Introduction

In biological terms, places of interaction between adjacent bioregions or ecosystems are known as ecotones. Areas of relationship between biotic communities, they are the liminal zones of the ecological world, syncretic landscapes of hybridity and interleaving, which are charged with fertility and evolutionary possibility. While postcolonial discourse is concerned with borderlands as points of cross-cultural contact, environmental theory and writing focus on the ecotone that occurs at the interface between human and non-human nature.

Simon Schama has identified the “richness, antiquity and complexity” of human / non-human linkages in Western cultures that have been widely perceived as isolated from the natural world, and the strength of those connections that are “often hidden beneath layers of the commonplace” (14). While the dualism of post-Enlightenment rationalism has attempted to solidify boundaries between self and world, the imaginative work performed by those artists and theorists who are concerned with their reconciliation, and with the creative possibility of the liminal, is to disclose, maintain and conceive sites of human / non-human transference.

What I wish to do in this essay, is explore the dialogical and textual correspondence that exists between humans and the non-human natural world, of which we are intrinsically a part, and the ways in which this discursive space is being shaped by the deleterious effects of the changing climate. With anthropogenic activity now understood to be the primary factor behind environmental change on a planetary scale, the mesh of relationships and interconnections which comprise the ecological world, are shifting in ways and at rates that are without precedent in human history. The diffuse and manifold effects of global warming are stretching our comprehension of nature, and the limits of its textual representation, in previously untested ways.

In both ecological and, as this essay will illustrate, conceptual and imaginative terms, climate change enacts a simultaneous solidification and disruption of natural boundaries. Zones of inter-species correspondence are being lost to habitat depletion and extinction, whilst new,



unproven interfaces are created through altering species distribution and human incursions into non-human habitats. While, in one sense, as a species we are removing ourselves from human / nature relationships in a manner reminiscent of post-Enlightenment abstraction, we are simultaneously implicating ourselves within them in ways which facilitate an unprecedented level of influence over their future composition, and in turn, the composition of the biosphere itself.

Naomi Klein has described the fitful and inadequate manner through which the Western consciousness has begun to apprehend the implications of global warming, and the ways in which we collectively engage in a process of remembering, then forgetting. “Climate change” she writes, “[is] hard to keep in your head for very long. We engage in this odd form of on-again off-again ecological amnesia for perfectly rational reasons. We deny because we fear that letting in the full reality of this crisis will change everything. And we are right” (5). This failure of cognitive commitment within the broader community extends to all fields of cultural scholarship and writing, including, though to a lesser degree, environmentally focused ecocritical practice. In the same way that cultural discourse has been lethargic in its engagement of nature itself, it has demonstrated a reluctance to adequately acknowledge nature’s changing face, and the latter deficit, as this essay will argue, both informs and is informed by the legacy of the former.

In the introduction to their 2014 “Global Warming Edition,” *ISLE* Editors Scott Slovic and Kathleen Dean Moore argue that writers have a responsibility, in the words of Slovic, to “articulate the meaning, or the many meanings, of global warming” (2). “A Call to Writers” identifies the considerable and multiple roles of literature during what is commonly identified as the pivotal decade in the fight against climate change. “[L]iterature,” writes Moore:

is a means by which cultures carry on a complicated, collaborative discourse about what is true and what is right – *and what is not*. In great thought experiments – the imagination’s ‘what if’ stories ask confounding questions and play out imagined answers, testing them against shared cultural experiences. In this way, every person doesn’t have to live out every mistake and survive every possible storm; we can envision what will happen ... We can imagine radically different futures before we get there, and turn away if we choose. For this reason and many more, literature embodies essential work at a time of decision. (3-4)

The urgency of the imperative is undeniable. In 2015, we are already mid-way through that decade referred to by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change as critical if we are to

avoid warming over two degrees, above which, the implications for the future have been described as potentially catastrophic (IPCC). The writers of today occupy a liminal moment in the unfolding crisis; they are among the first generations to apprehend the meaning of the changing climate, and the last who are able to remember the world as it was before the real implications began to be experienced and understood. What is recalled is not an idealised wilderness, not a people-less landscape or a world devoid of cultural modification, but a planet with a climate which has evolved over millennia, which created and supported the biosphere as we know it, and the myriad life-forms which comprise it. It is a unique perspective, and arguably contains a unique responsibility: a moment of potential revelation and decision that may never come again.

What this essay will argue, is that the vital work of writers today occasions an imagining not only of the future, but also of the true dynamic complexity of the land as it is, and as it was. Until we as writers and as a community as a whole come to grips with the vitality of non-human nature, and our role within it in its ecological entirety – absence, uncertainty and inaction will continue to plague cultural discourse on global warming. Paradoxically, it is the profoundly disruptive nature of the climate crisis itself, which may create the necessary imaginative traction for that shift in comprehension, forcing us, through loss, to acknowledge and interpret the world in ways that have been forgotten, and are fundamentally new.

While this essay can be read, in one sense, as a theoretical extension of certain elements of *Maps for the Lost*, and there is both a direct and implicit dialogue between the fictional and theoretical components of the project, the balance I have aimed for between the two is one of autonomy as well as connection<sup>1</sup>. Like the two strands of writing on the beach in “Drift,” the theory and fiction intersect, run in parallel, and often diverge. The short stories should not be interpreted as vehicles for the creative expression of theoretical ideas, and the essay, like any critical work, is intended to have an energy and direction of its own.

I will be working predominantly within a framework of ecocritical theory, drawing from the environmental and phenomenological texts of Barry Lopez, Bill McKibben, Mark Tredinnick, Richard Flanagan, David Abram and Lawrence Buell, and anchoring my research within the analytical writing of Peter Hay, Timothy Clark, Timothy Morton, Christopher Manes and Jane Gleeson-White. In so far as there is overlap between the two movements, and nature can be

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<sup>1</sup> Although *Maps for the Lost* is an unpublished manuscript, I have italicised the title in order to differentiate it from the short story of the same name.

identified as a subaltern subject, I have also utilised aspects of postcolonial scholarship, engaging the spatial theories of Paul Carter and the essays of Salman Rushdie, Zadie Smith and Robert Kroetsch. In so doing, I will look briefly at the juncture of contemporary ecocriticism and its wider theoretical context.

In the first chapter “The Land,” I will begin by defining the meaning of the term ‘nature’ itself, and the way human insecurities concerning our place *within* and relationship *with* the more-than-human world, are reflected in the language we use to describe it. In “Place” I will look at the land as an animate, multi-layered entity, engaged in reciprocal correspondence with the human culture and self. Noting the implications of the imaginative trajectory that arise from the inclusion of the landscape in creative and theoretical practice, I will discuss the political dimension of movement in dynamics of place, mapping and belonging. “Horizons” will touch upon the land as it is interpreted through the lens of modern science. I will examine the emerging trend in literary discourse, precipitated by the approach of ecocritical practice, towards a process of inter-disciplinary research that is underpinned by engagement with the scientific paradigm. In the context of Herbert F. Tucker’s reading of Hans Robert Jauss’ examination of interpretive horizons, and its application to the real-world terrains of the ecocritical imagination, I will look at the disproportionate lack of ecocritical engagement with the climate crisis to date, an elision which, though changing, reflects an alarming deficit within cultural discourse as a whole. In “Boundaries” while exploring the impacts of climate change on both conceptual and actual delineations between the human and non-human realms, I will turn to McKibben’s *The End of Nature*, exploring the meaning of ‘wilderness’ in a rapidly changing world, and exactly what it is that we have lost, or may yet lose, to global warming. Lastly, I will consider the revelatory dimension of the so-called climate apocalypse, introducing the idea that, in its very disruption, climate change may facilitate a new comprehension of the nature of the land we inhabit.

The second chapter, “Ecotones,” will examine the physical and imaginative interface between the human and non-human realms, with particular attention to concepts of speech and to the fertile agonistics of text-world relations. “Anthropomorphism” will examine the boundaries that are both transgressed and reinforced by anthropomorphic applications, and the textual re-centring of conventionally anthropocentric tropes by the ecologically-minded writers of today. Noting the formative role of the speaking landscape in indigenous and animistic traditions, I will discuss the creative and political significance of extension of voice to the non-human realm. “Text / World” will look at practises of inscription and embodiment in environmentally-centred writing. Through the lens of Abram’s sensory phenomenology – inspired by the philosophical texts of Maurice Merleau-Ponty – and Buell’s ‘dual accountability,’ I will examine the paradox

that is inherent in phenomenological representation, the asymptotical relation between text and world, and the tension between the name and the named in postcolonial and ecocritical writing. In concluding the chapter, I will turn to the poems of Les Murray's "Presence," from his 1992 anthology *Translations from the Natural World*, observing Murray's exploration of the nexus between place and identity, his work of phenomenological naming, and his immersive extension of voice to the non-human.

Lastly, within a context of ecological interconnection and postmodern and postcolonial fragmentation, chapter three, "The Imagination" addresses the role of patterning in formations of identity and meaning, and the ways in which the human imagination can be understood as *ecological*. In "Patterning" I will explore the relation between the postcolonial fragment and the synthesis of continuity and distinction that characterises ecological meaning. I will discuss the nexus between holism and reductionism in scientific and ecocritical practice, and its implications for textual explorations of the nature of the changing climate. "Natural Order" will look at the relation of chaos and order as it is presented by modern science, and the way the butterfly effect and chaos theory at once interpret the incomprehensible nature of inter-connection and inspire a metaphorical comprehension of the patterning that is present in nature. In so doing, I will touch briefly upon the benefits and hazards of incorporating scientific concepts into cultural interpretation. In the context of climate change, and the human need for coherence, I will reference Smith's thoughts on the political implications of the nexus between over-arching theory, the reductionism of modern science, and postmodern deconstruction. Lastly, I will observe the way the changing climate simultaneously fractures and homogenises ecological networks, and question the ways in which language fails to represent both the nature of ecological interconnection and the impacts of its disruption. In "Continuity" I will discuss indigenous and western concepts of temporality in nature, exploring the role of continuity in negotiations of place and self, with attention to the imaginative territory of the forest. Through the lens of Lopez's short story "The Salmon," I will examine the processes of immersion and the dissolution of the self that are often present in the writing of nature, and the limitations and hazards of what is ultimately a human-centred creative practice.

"The Role of Writers" will look to the function of literature and literary scholarship in the fight against the climate crisis. Investigating the role of environmental elegy, the act of bearing witness and literature's reliance upon apocalyptic narratives in a decade ravaged by extinction, I will return to the notion that our failure to adequately respond to the climate crisis is intrinsically related to a failure of language to represent it. Discussing Robert MacFarlane's examples of the impact of the changing climate upon indigenous words for nature, and the new abstraction of the modern idiom, I will note the multiple pressures that are being placed on the

language we use to describe the natural realm, and question the ability of traditional and particularly realist modes of writing to interpret the predicament of the changing climate. Before concluding the essay, I will turn to indigenous Australian writer Alexis Wright's 2013 novel *The Swan Book*, within the pages of which I believe it is possible to glimpse the future of writing about nature – as it was, and as it will be.

## Chapter One

### The Land

“The land is like poetry, it is inexplicably coherent, it is transcendent in its meaning, and it has the power to elevate a consideration of human life.”

Barry Lopez, *Arctic Dreams* 274

In literary discourse, as in common usage, the terms ‘nature’ / ‘natural’ and ‘place’ tend to be used interchangeably and their meanings inadequately defined. The word ‘nature’ alone has several, largely incompatible meanings, whose interrelation, as Clark has noted, “can be said to enact some distinctive environmental quandaries” (*Cambridge* 6). The uncertainties surrounding humanity’s place within, or outside of, what we define as nature, are embedded in the language we use to describe it. *The Oxford English Dictionary* lists ‘nature,’ in relation to the material world, as firstly: “[t]he creative and regulative power which is conceived of as operating in the material world and as the immediate cause of its phenomena” (a force which is symbolically identified as a person, often female, and most frequently a mother); secondly, as “the phenomena of the physical world collectively; *esp.* plants, animals, and other features and products of the earth itself, as opposed to humans and human creations;” and thirdly, and far more broadly, as “the whole natural world, including human beings” (OED).

Both the latter, apparently contradictory definitions have been heavily contested within environmental discourse. Neil Evernden suggests that the nature-culture dualism that is inherent in the more exclusive definition of “nature,” has rendered the term historically destructive and contemporarily irrelevant (102). From the opposite perspective, Gary Snyder argues that the inclusion of humanity within the broader definition can ultimately, and unhelpfully, lead to the observation that everything we do as a species is natural, and nothing, by definition, is ‘unnatural,’ thus reducing the power and accuracy of the term (8).

Where does humanity end and the rest of the ‘natural’ universe begin? Where are the boundaries? It is a fundamental question, but one that remains linguistically as well as philosophically unresolved. For clarity, in this essay I will primarily utilise the terms non-human or Abram’s ‘more-than-human’ nature, alongside Lopez’s more poetic, ‘the land,’ to

describe the vast ecological sphere that exists beyond the human skin and human invention. While not eliding the individual integrity of either, however, the premise of my argument still rests upon the understanding that humans are as much a part of nature as the wallaby or stream, and that conventional human / nature dualisms, which are commonly deemed archaic but remain systematically present in the language we use, are flawed.

### Place

Traditionally, scholarly studies have positioned ‘place’ as a passive backdrop to human activity, encompassing a diverse range of landscapes, from untrammelled wilderness to the human-built city. While the significance of both place and nature in studies of culture has been conventionally dismissed, the former can be seen to be a more fluid and thus more integrated term than the latter, in that it is not specifically applied nor restricted to either the human or non-human realm.

Edward Relph has written, of the nexus between concepts of place and human belonging, that Places: “are not experienced as independent, clearly defined entities that can be described simply in terms of their location or appearance. Rather they are sensed in a chiaroscuro of setting, landscape, ritual, routine, other people, personal experiences, care and concern for home, and in the context of other places” (29). Place, like the land itself, is a dynamic and multi-dimensional phenomenon; it is neither fixed nor bounded, but permeated by the cultural imagination, by corporeal bodies and the memory and peripheries of additional landscapes.

While questions of causality have long determined philosophical discourse on place and culture, ecological science has emphasised the *symbiotic* nature of the relation. It is a shift in emphasis which, when applied to human / nature relations in particular, has significantly informed Western environmental paradigms, and in literary scholarship, seeded the development of ecocritical study. The concept of a mutually informing dynamic between human and non-human nature, or culture and place, marks a movement in contemporary thinking away from post-Enlightenment rationalism towards the more reflexively subjective epistemology of indigenous and phenomenological traditions, in which externally formulated concepts of the land are replaced by experiential internality.

Attachment to place can be both an intensely individual and political phenomenon. While Relph has quoted J.K. Wright in describing the earth as ““an immense patchwork of miniature *terrae incognitae*’ – the private geographies of individuals” (36), suggesting social

constructions of place that occur on a primarily subjective level, postcolonial theorists foreground the political nature of the relation between place and self. While the essentialising impulse of imperialism imagined an appropriable landscape, determined by the colonising culture, in postcolonial writings places are beginning to be understood as protean and dynamic, and attention to the buried, pre-colonial landscape, as elemental to counter-colonial resistance.

Carter has noted the importance of, and necessity for, the inclusion of the dynamic landscape in postcolonial practice concerned with the surfacing of liminal voices. Rejecting colonial concepts of the land as being uniform and inert, his argument, notable for its enactive positioning in the intersection between postcolonial theory and ecocritical phenomenology, highlights the gap between contemporary scholarship's mobilisation of abstracted spatial metaphor, and the shifting topographies of actual landscapes. The Cartesian oppositions that informed imperial relations with the colonised land, he has written, were symptomatic of a need for epistemological certainty, in which "order was cognate with clearing ground, with the eradication of local difference" (*Crossing* 3). When the certitude of colonial convention is replaced by a practice that responds to the contingencies of actual landscapes, to the "peripeteia of uneven ground" (Carter, *Crossing* 3), the interstitial spaces of hegemonic dualism are subsequently revealed. In this way, attention to the plurality of the non-linear environments we inhabit or represent can be seen to create room for the narratives, histories and voices that dualistic knowledge systems traditionally elide: voices, ecocriticism suggests, which include those that emanate from the landscape itself.

Laklak Burarrwanga et al's collectively written essay, "They Are not Voiceless," describes the relationship of "responsibility and reciprocity" (3) that exists between the indigenous Australian tribes of far north Queensland and their traditional homelands. "Country," they have written:

is a word ... that we use to describe not just our land or clan estate, though it is that too, but also the relationships, the songs and stories, the beings, the histories, the water and air that come together in a mutually ... interconnected way to make Country a *homeland*. (4)

The strength of this relationship and the indigenous understanding of the agency of the land are evident in the inclusion of 'Bawaka Country' among the essay's authors. In Aboriginal English, as Deborah Bird-Rose explains, the word 'country' "is not only a common noun, but a proper noun ... Country is not a generalised or undifferentiated type of place," she writes. "Rather, country is a living entity with a yesterday, today and tomorrow, with a consciousness, and a will towards life" (7). Indigenous place is poly-vocal and responsive, and it has a vitality which is reflected in the language which is used to describe it. Delineations between country or place and its human inhabitants, and the hierarchical systems that are attached to such delineation, are not



written into indigenous language or culture. Time spans, numbers and distance have no abstracted terminology or systems of quantification; instead they are referred to through language that is physically embedded in the landscape: in natural species, objects and phenomena. Similarly, there are few Aboriginal languages with specific words for colour, for identifiable colours are present in the environment, in the sky, the vegetation, the animals and the soil, and the need for abstraction is not recognised (Fryer-Smith 3).

Although groundedness has been conventionally perceived as delimiting in intellectual practice, in the manner of the interactive ecosystem, Carter's emphasis is on *movement*, on the "physical dialogue" (Lie 11) that arises from a responsive engagement with place. In the context of the dynamic relationships and pathways of ecological theory, the inclusion of the landscape or world in the text, can be understood as a practice that, rather than having a reductive effect, opens it out to multiple possibilities. While stability is commonly cited as a precursor for the development of a sense of place, movement or nomadism (whether human or non-human) creates a broader, less definable breed of place-attachment, in which the simultaneously proximate and unbounded nature of belonging and place is reflected. In "Seeds," an elderly woman's nomadic identity resurfaces through renewed physical intimacy with the landscape. Like Proust's madeleines, the quotidian scents and colours of the garden activate the sensory memory and open a network of spatial and temporal pathways in the imaginative consciousness: a process of continuity and interdependence which is germane to concepts of ecological interconnection (53).

The transgressive quality of mobility, whether in the form of physical migration or the metaphorical trajectory of memory, makes it naturally resistant to practices of containment. Where stability may facilitate an intimate knowledge of place, the orbit of the physical body, as Ed Casey has observed, "is the major way in which the human subject explores and comes to know circumambient space" (230). In many of the stories in *Maps for the Lost*, intimacy between the characters and the landscapes they inhabit arises through physical movement, through traversing the uneven surfaces and paths of beaches, cities and forests. The identification of the role of physicality or embodiment in place negotiation, in the form of kinetic habitation, somatic memory and the sensory dimension of language, is of central importance within both postcolonial and ecocritical thinking. In the former, the body as a site of simultaneous movement, immanence, and memory, is understood as a vehicle of counter-colonial resistance, while in the latter, the mobile, corporeal body creates an isthmus between conventional divisions of world and self-in-mind.

While movement is associated with freedom, it is similarly implicated within narratives of enforced dislocation, in which established connections between identity and place are severed through dispossession. In a number of the stories, the central characters experience, or have experienced, some form of psychological or physical dislocation. For the elderly woman in “Seeds,” the loss of her memory leaves her psychologically disconnected from both the past and the future, and, without a sense of temporal continuity, unable to negotiate belonging in the present. In “Drift” both characters experience forms of isolation, one is physically dispossessed of his home, and the other, despite an intimate knowledge of the place she inhabits, feels emotionally disconnected from the land after the termination of her pregnancy. In “Maps for the Lost,” Tomaš’ alienation is caused by the cultural metamorphosis of the remembering city, and by the imposition of the geo-political borders that affect Iluka’s exile. Yet what links the characters of the stories, is not so much alienation, but the way their dislocation is mediated and resolved through their relationships with the land. In response to their isolation, and to the often arbitrary, sometimes violent nature of human demarcations, the characters turn to subterranean, or rather *subaltern* sources of identification: to the patterns, places and relationships of the non-human world.

It is perhaps helpful to note here that conceiving of place as a dynamic, shape-shifting entity does not preclude the local characteristics or integrity of individual landscapes. While postcolonial projects in particular draw attention to the artificiality of borders that are constructed as impermeable by colonial practice, the deconstruction of imperial geographies is tempered by an awareness of the impossibility of what James Sidaway has called the “postcolonial promised land” (27). When they elide their own hierarchical genealogies, and the differences that occur within and between postcolonial nations, postcolonial narratives risk reinscribing the essentialising impulses of the hegemonic systems they are attempting to displace. Recognising the pre-colonial landscape, and modes of identity and belonging that are antecedent to the application of geo-political borders, does not by necessity entail a holistic denial of existing demarcation. Rather, it emphasises the multiplicity of borders, and the transitional constitution of both culture and place.

Graham Huggan has described the role of cartography in the material and conceptual implementation of colonial governance. Mapping, he suggests, exemplifies colonial methodology in its rhetorical practice of “the reinscription, enclosure, and hierarchisation of space” (“Decolonising” 123), a practice that is both analogous to, and facilitative of, hegemonic power. In postcolonial narratives, however, cartographic processes have been appropriated as the visual signifiers of alternative geographies. “The ‘new spaces’ of postcolonial writing,” Huggan has written:

can be considered to resist one form of cartographic discourse, whose patterns of coercion and containment are historically implicated in the colonial enterprise, but to advocate another, whose flexible cross-cultural patterns not only counteract the monolithic conventions of the West but revision the map itself as the expression of a shifting ground between alternative metaphors rather than as the approximate representation of a 'literal truth.' ("Decolonising"125)

The re-mappings of counter-colonial discourse, then, at once subvert the coercive fixity of imperial demarcation, and acknowledge the metaphoric and subjective quality of the cartographic image. By reflexively mobilising rather than eliding the nature of maps as "[n]eatly folded simulacra" (Lopez, *Arctic* 280), postcolonial practice can be seen to make an imaginative movement towards the dynamic plurality of actual landscapes.

For Tomaš in "Maps for the Lost," cosmography is an art of imagining alternative worlds. Through the literal re-mapping of the globe, he taps into a subliminal network of trajectories that are resonant within both postcolonial and ecocritical dialogues. The surfacing of invisible histories and pathways, and perceptions of place as a palimpsest, unsettle the linear hierarchy that supports conventional models of spatial organisation. In "Maps for the Lost," the buried geographies of human landscapes coalesce with those of the non-human realm: the territories of .wolves and the scent-trails of a fox mingle imperceptibly with nocturnal Prague and the ransacked villages of post-war Croatia. Lopez has noted the human propensity to see the non-human landscape as supernatural, because of its perceived defiance of anthropocentrically interpreted space. "It's easy to see why animals might seem magical," he has observed, "[s]piders and birds are bound differently than we are by gravity. Many wild creatures travel unerringly through the dark. And animals regularly respond to what we, even at our most attentive, cannot discern" ("Literature" 11). Whether creative or theoretical, the artefact or text that attends to the animate landscape is injected with the movement that is inherent in ecological systems, and in the fertile tension of syncretic continuity. In "Maps for the Lost," the dislocation of the characters brings them into physical and imaginative contact with the peripheral geographies of the non-human realm. Like the responsive and agential garden in "Seeds," the fox-cub is both symbol and protagonist: an embodiment of, and navigator for, the unmapped subaltern landscape. For Tomaš, the urban and orphaned cub is not only an animate realisation of his lover's dispossession, and of his own experience of alterity, but an interpreter or guide for travel in the margins of the human and more-than-human worlds.

## Horizons

The lenses of modern science interpret nature (both human and non-human) in terms of relatedness, dynamism, fluidity and motion. Ecological science and the new physics of quantum mechanics and chaos theory present a universe that is at once profoundly ordered and essentially indeterminable, a universe in which, as Hay has noted: “the greatest epistemological casualty...[is] scientific certainty” (*Main Currents* 228).

In a notable departure from more traditional modes of literary scholarship, ecocritical study has been vitally informed by the scientific paradigm, with particular focus on the biological sciences. Ecocriticism, write Michael Branch et al in the introduction to *Reading the Earth: New Directions in the Study of literature and Environment*, “is not just a means of analysing nature in literature; it implies a move toward a more biocentric worldview, an extension of ethics, a broadening of human conception of global community to include non-human life forms and the physical environment” (xiii). The discipline’s concern with evolution and with the ecological sciences, which emphasise the symbiotic relation between human and non-human nature, has aroused suspicion from schools of criticism based upon cultural prisms such as Marxism and, more recently, postcolonial theory. It is, however, an ill-ease which can be seen to be dissipating, with contemporary cultural scholarship in general moving towards the possibilities of cross-pollination that arise from interdisciplinary research. In her analysis of ecocritical and postcolonial responses to climate change, Anne Maxwell has noted that a number of postcolonial theorists are beginning to look to ecocritical writing in an attempt to prompt a shift towards an engagement with the scientific paradigm which has become critical in the light of contemporary environmental crises (“Underwater”).

Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin’s recent book *Postcolonial Ecocriticism: Literature, Animals, Environment*, attempts to integrate key aspects of postcolonial and ecocritical scholarship into textual interpretation, without eliding their differences. While postcolonial scholarship’s aspiration towards a more active correspondence with scientific and environmental discourse is self-evident in the collection, in their introduction, Huggan and Tiffin express a certain level of scepticism about the central role of ecological science in ecocritical practice. “Ecology,” they write “... tends to function more as *aesthetic* than as *methodology* in eco/environmental criticism, providing the literary-minded critic with a storehouse of ... metaphors through which the socially transformative workings of the ‘environmental imagination’ (Buell 1995) can be mobilised and performed” (13). This dissonance between the metaphorical and methodological mobilisation of external referents in cultural scholarship is hardly unique to environmental criticism, and Huggan and Tiffin are quick to acknowledge this, but it is an interesting critique

in the sense that it directs us to question the problematic nature of critical engagement with the living, and in this instance, scientific, landscape.

The question of the cultural conveyance and possible appropriation of the science of nature in both theoretical and creative texts is important to bear in mind, and is in some respects germane to shifting notions of anthropomorphic practice, which I will discuss in the following chapter. The level of science which transcends metaphor in ecocritical texts is dependent upon the background and inclination of the individual theorist, and at times any science that does exist is located more in the analysed texts than in their critical interpretation. In “The Ecological Short Story,” Glen A. Love describes the role early nature writing played in the dissemination of ecological knowledge. “The work of nature writers,” he explains, “many of whom were trained in sciences like biology and anthropology, has been instrumental in raising the general level of ecological awareness and understanding in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries” (“Ecological” 51). Though a broader scientific education for cultural theorists is an ideal to which ecocritical scholarship aspires, however, literary scholars are rarely scientists, and I would argue that any perceived superficiality in scientific engagement tends to be more a pragmatic position than an appropriative strategy. For the majority of ecocritical writers, informed correspondence with the sciences, metaphorical or otherwise, is under-taken with the intention of furthering knowledge of the natural world, rather than as a potentially appropriative aesthetics, and for now, that is as it should be.

For both the ecocritical and postcolonial schools, any real correspondence with the scientific paradigm is dependent upon a comprehension of the ultimately semantic nature of human separation from the non-human world, relying on an extension of perspective, of horizons both figurative and literal, and a willingness to mobilise the concepts of a paradigm that are as immutable as they are intricate and unstable. Tucker suggests that ecocritical theory has called for a culture of “dialogue, not dictation” (506) between arts based scholarship and the natural sciences, a dialogue that at once attends to the biospheric context in which knowledge and interpretation are produced, and acknowledges the complexity and instability of that context. To illustrate the paradox of fixity and relativity that exists within literary interpretation, reader response theorist Jauss used philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer’s trope of the horizon. In any practice of interpretation, Jauss observed, both text and reader are subject to ‘horizons of expectation,’ which arise from the interplay between abstracted or over-arching theory and discrete historical (and geographical) positioning (14). The horizon line, Tucker explained, “is on one hand a boundary that defies transgression yet on the other hand a construct that is subject to change” (505). Where Jauss was primarily concerned with historical circumstance, Tucker has noted that it is the ecocritical perspective – through its engagement with the literal, with the

actual biophysical world in which knowledge is produced – that “illuminates with special privilege this paradox of the interpretive horizon” (505). Ecocriticism, he has written: “challenges interpretation to its own grounding in the bedrock of natural fact, in the biospheric and planetary conditions without which human life, much less human letters, could not exist. Ecocriticism thus claims as its hermeneutic horizon nothing short of the literal horizon itself” (506). According to Tucker, the challenge for ecocritical thought is twofold: to locate interpretation within the actual, physical horizons inside which culture is both produced and received, whilst acknowledging the “insistent transformation” (both naturally and culturally wrought) of those surroundings (506). “Horizons are constructs” he observes:

[s]o are habitats, so are bioregions, so are ecosystems ... The place of the ecocritic then remains, like the place of life itself, intermediate: ... between a material substrate setting the terms of existence and the changes wrought thereon by adaptive life processes, among them that unpredictable biosurplus, the literary imagination. (506)

Despite, and in part because of, the magnitude of the climate crisis and its implications, it is an issue which, though changing, is still disproportionately under-represented in literary analysis, and in cultural discourse as a whole. Clark illustrates past absence by pointing to the fact that climate change was not listed in the index of Buell’s 2005 ecocritical textbook, *The Future of Environmental Criticism* (Cambridge 11). Yet this lack of ecocritical engagement with the crisis, he suggests, may be “more to do with the novelty and scope of the problem than with personal failing, a measure of how starkly climate change eludes inherited ways of thinking” (Cambridge 11). Because of its foundations in ecological science, and its inherent understanding of environmental threats, ecocritical scholarship should be ideally placed to recognise the shifting nature of the biospheric context. Yet climate change, though arguably calling for acknowledgement with more validity and urgency than any issue before it, fundamentally destabilises the horizons by which we anchor much of our current understanding, and has, as such, revealed the deficiencies of prevailing modes of writing and thought in unprecedented ways. “Many ecocritical arguments,” explains Clark, “are taking place on the wrong scale, or will now need to think on several scales at once ... we still have little sense of how overwhelmingly global scale an issue must affect methodologies of reading and interpretation” (Cambridge 136).

In her preface to Greg Garrard’s recent *Oxford Handbook of Ecocriticism*, Cheryll Glotfelty observes that climate change is “the dominant issue looming over [the] collection like a big, dark cloud” (xi). While two of the thirty-four essays in the collection explicitly address the climate crisis, and many others touch upon it, Glotfelty notes that “despite keen attention to climate change, compared with the early work in this field ecocriticism as practised today

focuses less on specific environmental issues and more on questions of environmentality and the nature of the human” (xi-xii). This lack of explicit focus is at once a manifestation of a philosophical trend that has emerged within ecocritical discourse, a recognition that climate change is a physical manifestation of the profound philosophical schism that has developed between human and non-human nature, and a reflection of the challenges identified by Clark.

To an extent the legacy of rationalist thought can be seen to be the driving force behind the global community’s lethargic response to the climate crisis, if not the crisis itself. Environmental scholarship and nature writing have attempted to subvert enduring binaries by permeating, or revealing the permeable nature of the demarcations between humanity as a species and the more-than-human world. Yet it is an endeavour which has been complicated by the constantly shifting boundaries of the globalising world, by the incursions of scientific developments on natural processes and, most recently, by the anthropogenic phenomenon that is altering the constitution of the biosphere of our planet and, in the process, simultaneously eroding and shoring the borderlines between what is human and what is not. It is a consequence of climate change which has inspired, as Glotfelty has observed, a re-invigorated interrogation of “the nature of the human,” (xii) and of nature itself, and has provoked an inward-looking trend within environmental discourse that is at once philosophically vital, and potentially diverting.

### Boundaries

Hay has argued that the use of tangible incursions by humans upon the natural world to determine the integrity, or otherwise, of nature, is founded upon reductive assumptions. “Why should it be assumed” he asks, “that the smallest incursion of culture into nature constitutes the end of nature? It is just as logical to argue the opposite – that, because trees grow in London’s parks, and geraniums in its window boxes, London has ceased to be part of the realm of culture, and has become nature” (*Main Currents* 23). Rather than focusing on physical and geographical borders, Hay suggests, the more useful referents are the *processes*, be they natural or cultural, by which the Earth’s biophysical systems are constituted. In an era of unprecedented changes to the makeup of our atmosphere, and the ocean acidification, melting ice-caps and altered plant and animal behaviours that are its consequence, humanity’s incursions upon those basic and intricate biophysical processes that we understand as nature have become increasingly difficult to elide. In his book, *The End of Nature*, widely hailed as the text that brought the concept of global warming into the public consciousness, McKibben wrote of the almost unfathomable degree to which our species has altered the planet we inhabit, and the

implications of such transgressions. The early evidence of global warming, McKibben argued, demonstrated that, “for the first time human beings had become so large that they altered everything around us. That we had ended nature as an independent force, that our appetites, habits and desires could now be read in every cubic meter of air, in every increment on the thermometer” (*End* xviii). This ending of nature, McKibben asserted, was not an ending of the biospheric complexity that constitutes nature, but rather, the cessation of an idea, “the thing that has, at least in modern times, defined nature for us – its separation from human society” (*End* 55). Though *The End of Nature* has been criticised for reiterating dualistic divisions, McKibben, whilst acknowledging the argument’s validity, has deemed it largely semantic. For nature itself, it is not so much an ending but a change, and both the loss of the idea of an independent nature, and the intrinsic alteration of the natural world itself which informs this loss, are notions with, as McKibben maintained, profound implications not only for science and for the biosphere, but “for our philosophy, our theology, our sense of self” (*End* xviii). Yet despite this, it is an idea that has only recently begun to be examined in any depth. At the time of publication, *The End of Nature* was viewed by some as a speculative and pessimistic book, but twenty-six years later the term ‘Anthropocene,’ popularised by chemist Paul Crutzen to describe a new epoch in which humans are the main stimulus behind global geological change, is in widespread usage, and is in the process of being considered for formal adoption by the International Commission on Stratigraphy (Sample). Like McKibben, contemporary science shows that what is influenced by humanity and what is not is shifting at a rate unlike any other in human history, and it is no longer effective, nor plausible to analyse the politics of the lacunae, or overlaps between human and non-human nature, without considerable attention to this fact.

Citing McKibben’s essay, “The Emotional Core of the End of Nature,” David L. Levy has written that the lament at the heart of McKibben’s book “is not just for the deleterious environmental impacts of climate change, but for the passing of ‘a certain set of human ideas about the world and our place in it’” (178). There is a nostalgic romanticism in *The End of Nature* which is informed by the work of American naturalists and writers such as John Burroughs, Henry David Thoreau and John Muir, and their reverence for the wilderness of the frontier. Modern notions of ‘wilderness’ as places of intrinsic, even reverential value, existing beyond human dominion and interference, have their discursive origins in nineteenth-century Romanticism and the American Transcendentalism that was its off-shoot. The remnants of a nature that remains relatively undisturbed by human activity, it is a concept of emotive, symbolic and strategic power, and is the cornerstone of contemporary environmentalism. Yet like nature itself, the idea of wilderness remains a profoundly contested discursive space, within which it is possible to glimpse the essence of our complex, destructive and often paradoxical



relationship with the non-human world. William Cronon has argued that, “[f]ar from being the one place on earth that stands apart from humanity,” wilderness is “quite profoundly a human creation – indeed, the creation of very particular human cultures at very particular moments in human history” (69). In Western culture, untamed nature was originally associated with dualistic religious imagery. Wilderness was constructed as a landscape of profound and dangerous alterity, a savage, marginal wasteland or post-lapsarian wild, existing in opposition to anglo-christian civilisation. This perception, which was the dominant representation until the late eighteenth century, was superseded by the poetic imagery of the European Romantics, a movement championed by artists such as William Blake and William Wordsworth, and, in North America, environmentalists including Muir and Thoreau. Through the transcendent vision of the Romantic sublime, the metaphors of biblical mythology were inverted, and in the works of philosophers, poets and painters, the barren wilderness became a garden: a temple of inspiration, populated by “angels, as well as wild beasts” (Cronon 73). Despite representing a paradigm shift in environmental thought, however, the Romantic sublime remained an essentially anthropocentric construct, with emphasis placed upon transcendent human responses to the natural world, rather than acknowledging an intrinsic or independent value within nature itself.

This Romantic deification of the remote, the un-populated and the iconically beautiful in nature, which continues to inform contemporary concepts of wilderness, has to a degree reinforced rationalistic human separation from the natural world. By constructing wild nature as the antithesis of a repugnant civilisation, the veneration of a select and privileged wilderness arguably serves to recreate the very binaries the environment movement desires to overcome. “Rather than addressing humanity’s alienation from its soul,” writes Flanagan, “this idea of wilderness simply reproduces it” (“Wilderness” 116). As a concept, wilderness has been criticised as an expression of a bourgeois, euro-centric arrogance, arising from and effectively perpetuating the alienation of western urban society from non-human nature. Historically, in the United States, declarations of ‘unpopulated’ national parks were often preceded by the forced migration of their Native American inhabitants, while in Australia – a continent that has been nomadically occupied and altered by indigenous Australians for more than sixty thousand years – notions of wilderness as being empty of humans have been accused of replicating the imperial ideologies of *terra nullius*. In defence of the modern environment movement, however, commentators such as Hay argue that such claims of negation or “denial of human presence” in wilderness philosophy are “more apparent than real” (*Main Currents* 19), and it is notable that a movement charged with playing the politics of *terra nullius* should be simultaneously condemned for a romantic idealising of indigenous harmony with the natural world.

The sanctifying of a landscape that is psychologically, if not geographically remote from humanity, risks reinforcing the conceptual split between humans and nature, and between an idealised wilderness and the ordinary, “less exalted” (Hay, *Main Currents* 329) nature with which we interact during our daily lives. Hierarchical and anthropocentric divisions within nature, imbued with the aesthetic and economic prejudices of Western culture, began to be surpassed during the mid-twentieth century by the development of an holistic ecosystemic science, and, in philosophical discourse, by Aldo Leopold’s integrational “Land Ethic” (865). Modern critics of wilderness, however, argue that it remains a concept that is often defined by artificial and ecologically inadequate borders, creating remnant and discontinuous islands which, with insufficient species interchange, can rapidly become evolutionary dead ends.

At a time in which the integrity of islands and of reserves of any kind are threatened by the transgressive effects of atmospheric change, the notion of wilderness has become ever more problematic, yet attempts at environmental preservation have never been more urgent. In “Wilderness and History,” Flanagan acknowledges the necessity for protection of threatened environments in a society that is governed by anthropocentric greed, yet maintains that preservation values, articulated by the enshrinement of wilderness regions, “are based on an acceptance of the viciousness of the status quo” (“Wilderness” 104). Wilderness, he writes:

as a rallying call for a new outlook, as a crisis shelter for us to house precious remnants of the natural world, has had an important role to play. But ultimately we must move beyond this idea. We must learn to live *with* the natural world and not apart from it: that means neither denying it through destruction, nor falsely venerating it through preservation. It means reintegrating it into our daily lives imaginatively, creatively, spiritually, economically. And it means placing ourselves back into the land as part of the earth. (*Mountain* 25)

It is a salient criticism, and a challenge that is at the heart of the ecocritical agenda, yet the perilous predicament of many of the world’s ecosystems, and the rapid deterioration and disappearance of the landscapes we choose to call wilderness, makes their continued recognition and preservation an urgent, if uncomfortable, environmental imperative.

In *The End of Nature* McKibben does not attempt to undermine the role of, and necessity for, the idea of wilderness in the human psyche. He notes, instead, the enduring quality of the notion, a resilience, he suggests, which is underpinned by our longing for independent nature. “This idea of nature is hardy,” he writes. “Our ability to shut the destroyed areas from our minds, to see the beauty around man’s degradation is considerable” (*End* 48). Yet the basis for this faith, he maintains, has been lost to the awareness that Earthly nature can no longer be considered truly separate or eternal in the sense that it has been.

The conclusion to *The End of Nature* is a meditation on the night sky, and the role it might assume in a future in which every aspect of our own planet, including and beginning with its atmosphere, has been intrinsically altered by human kind. “We may be creating microscopic nature,” McKibben writes:

we may have altered the middle nature all around us, but the vast nature above our atmosphere still holds mystery and wonder [...]. Someday, man may figure out a method of conquering the stars, but at least for now when we look into the night sky, it is as Burroughs said, “We do not see ourselves reflected there – we are swept away from ourselves, and impressed with our own insignificance.”

As I lay on the mountaintop on that August night I tried to pick out the few constellations I could identify – Orion’s Belt, the Dippers. The ancients, surrounded by wild and even hostile nature, took comfort in seeing the familiar above them – spoons and swords and nets. But we will need to train ourselves not to see those patterns. The comfort we need is inhuman. (*End* 185)

What the passage identifies, aside from the scope of the project of anthropocentric naming, and the need for its reversal, is the fundamental human desire for something existing beyond us, something perceptibly separate from us. It is the scale of the mourning that this loss of difference inspires, this loss of externality, which informs the “self-consciously apocalyptic tone” (Huggan and Tiffin 226) of *The End of Nature*. McKibben’s apocalypse, however, is less an end of the world and more a signifying of the end of a kind of irreplaceable natural continuity, the loss of which may eventually come at a catastrophic price. In this sense, the book is as much a work of warning as it is of elegy.

In “Confronting Catastrophe: Ecocriticism in a Warming World,” Kate Rigby looks to writer Junot Diaz’s reflections on the aftermath of the destructive Haitian earthquake to illustrate the nature of cataclysmic revelation. “Diaz recalls that the Greek *apocalypsis*,” she writes:

refers not simply to catastrophe, but to ‘a disruptive event that provokes revelation.’ Citing James Berger in *After the End*, Diaz explains that the ‘apocalyptic event...in order to be truly apocalyptic, must in its disruptive moment clarify and illuminate the true nature of what has been brought to an end.’ (218)

Whether the application of the term ‘apocalyptic’ to the climate crisis is appropriate, or whether apocalyptic visions of its future affects might precipitate a change in attitude and behaviour, is debatable, and a question I will return to later in the essay, yet the nature of the crisis as transformative, is plain. “Apocalyptic catastrophes don’t just raze cities and drown coastlines,” writes Diaz, “those events, in David Brook’s words, ‘wash away the surface of society, the settled way things have been done’” (Diaz). To date, it is to this revelatory dimension of apocalypse that much of climate change literature and analysis appears to have pinned its hopes,

its ability to strip back and lay bare the conventions, binaries and false assumptions of the present and the past, and illuminate the un-charted nature of the land, and of the future, we are creating.

## Chapter Two

### Ecotones

“The edges of any landscapes – horizons, the lip of a valley, the bend of a river around a canyon wall – quicken an observer’s expectations. That attraction to the earth’s twilight places, is part of the shape of human curiosity.”

Barry Lopez, *Arctic Dreams* 123

Originating from the dualism of post-Enlightenment rationalism, the construction of conceptually impermeable boundaries is driven by both ideological and authoritarian imperatives. Borders between self and other, mind and body, human and non-human are, like geo-political boundaries, constructed as indissoluble in order to justify hegemonic control, and the liminal spaces between conceptually disparate territories are perceived as sites of instability and threat. As I have suggested in the introduction, the interstitial frontiers of postcolonial (self / other) and ecocritical (human / non-human) narratives, are analogous to biological ecotones: the transitional zones connecting adjacent ecosystems or bio-regions. Like the hybridised landscapes of postcolonialism, ecotones are inter and intra-species meeting grounds of intense fertility and evolutionary possibility. Romand Coles has written, that when coupled with the etymology of the term – “*oikos* (dwelling), and *tonus* (tension)” (243) – the nature of the ecotone evokes “an image of the fertility and pregnancy of dwelling at the edge of the tension between different people, beings, landscapes” (243). By drawing attention to the linguistic genealogy of the term, Coles’ argument, like the term ‘ecology’ itself, yokes semantic and biogeographical concepts, and gestures towards the ecotone that “occurs at the dialogical edge between the self and the otherness of the world” (243): the zone of communication between the human and non-human realms.

### Anthropomorphism

In Western literature, the discursive linkage of the natural and the human has been re-fashioned and ecologically re-centred within modern environmental writing. While the apparently anthropocentric bias of the Romantics has been rejected by the ecologically conscious writers of

today, there is a general coherence between the movements in their unsettlement of oppositions between self and nature. In her discussion of Romantic apostrophe and pathetic fallacy, Helena Feder has suggested that, by re-envisioning the contemporarily maligned tropes as dialogical expressions of interconnectedness, they can be re-interpreted as potentially anti-anthropocentric strategies. “Inherent in any invocation of the natural world,” she has written, “is a recognition that reciprocity is embedded in the very interconnectedness of all things, in an awareness of the sensitivity and multiplicity of those intricate connections” (44). While anthropomorphism can be considered a semantic appropriation of non-human alterity, the extension of sympathy to the external world, where it is founded in dialogical reciprocity, can be read as a realisation of ecological interconnection.

In the short stories the boundaries between the human and non-human, self and place, are largely represented as permeable and dynamic. In “Maps for the Lost” and “Seeds,” nature physically encroaches into human spaces, re-occupying an abandoned village, moving into the home of a woman who is approaching the end of her life. While the stories can be seen to mobilise anthropomorphic strategies, the way the old woman’s ennui and loneliness is mirrored by her garden, and the notion of the not only voiced, but literate landscape that is suggested by “Drift,” such strategies are undertaken with the intention of destabilising boundaries through imaginative reciprocity, rather than replicating appropriation. The pathetic fallacy of ‘Seeds’ is subverted (where the device is read as human-centred) or expanded (where it is interpreted as an expression of holistic interconnection), by the reciprocal nature of human / non-human transgressions in the narrative. While the garden responds to, and becomes symbolic of, the old woman’s psyche, it equally infiltrates her consciousness, her home, and ultimately her body.

In “Drift,” the true agency of the ocean can be seen to lie not in the possibility of its speaking, but in its perceived silence, in its active withholding of appropriable voice. Extensions of human voice to the non-human in literature, as the problematic nature of Romantic apostrophe suggests, are fraught with ethical questions of ventriloquism and translation. In ecocritical thought, however, dialogue creates a bridge between artificially delineated landscapes, and seeks to replace the subject-object dualism that underpins rationalistic inquiry and monocular literature, with multi-vocality and subject-*subject* communication. Informed by the textual imperatives of Bakhtinian dialogics, environmentally-minded theorists and writers have called for representations of nature that, by broadening concepts of both human and non-human speaking, re-voice and re-animate the non-human world, while reflexively attending to the ethical hazards of the practice.

“The Catch” engages a second person narrative voice in imagining the experience of an albatross attempting to nurture her chick, in an ocean polluted by plastic. The use of the pronoun ‘you,’ while acknowledging the literal distance between narrator and subject, and avoiding some of the hazards of conveying voice, prompts a blurring of boundaries between subject and reader / human and non-human, and evokes a kind of empathetic intimacy that is less easily replicated in first person prose.

The presence of animals in a text, insofar as they are invested with an integrity that surpasses mere symbolism, presents challenges for both writer and critic. “Writing that attempts an imaginary identification across the species barrier,” observes Clark:

forms a beguiling and under-recognised practice. It is as if writers were taking up the supposedly impossible challenge of Thomas Nagel’s famous article, ‘What is it like to be a bat?’ Against the increasing appropriation of animals as images in the human environment, such literature strives to do justice to the non-human as an agent in its own right, pushing against the inherent anthropocentrism of inherited language towards a partial if always problematic overlapping of life worlds. Few projects in the arts of language are perhaps more difficult to judge. (*Cambridge* 197)

The expression of anthropomorphism, a term which, despite its recent re-centring by ecologically-minded writers, is enduringly applied to representations of nature as critique, provides an informative example of the challenges that are inherent in textual invocations of non-human nature, and their critical interpretation. It is self-evident that any imaginative artefact that is created by a human must be constrained by human perspective, and for this reason identifying where the boundaries of anthropomorphism lie can be seen to be a purely subjective (and exclusively human) venture. Equally problematic is the fact that implicit in any accusation of anthropomorphism is the assumption that specific traits and qualities are uniquely human, an assumption built upon the false-premise that what is definitively human, and what is not, is categorically understood. For this reason and others, the often subtle differences between appropriative representations of nature and honest attempts at understanding and extension of sympathy to the non-human world, are, as Clark has observed, exceptionally difficult to determine. In contemporary nature writing, anthropomorphic tendencies that have been ecologically re-centred, are arguably under-pinned by careful observation, reflexivity, scientific or experiential knowledge, and the intention to reveal rather than obscure the nature of the non-human subject, and as such stand in contrast to the aesthetically based and human-centred language of the Romantics, yet it remains a provocative and, in the words of Clark, “perhaps ultimately irresolvable” (*Cambridge* 195) artistic challenge. The notion and application of anthropomorphism, Clark writes, is at once “a mode of understanding non-human animals, a profound barrier to such understanding, a mode of appropriating of animal otherness, and a term

that rebounds into the open question of what the human actually is” (*Cambridge* 199), opening out a discursive space that is at once illuminating and occlusive.

Antecedent to its incorporation into the literature of the Romantics, extension of voice to non-human nature originated within the animistic traditions of indigenous and pre-Christian oral cultures. In animistic societies, nature is not silent object, but “vulnerable subject” (Manes 15) and the ability to hear and interpret its speaking is understood as vital to both human knowledge and, more fundamentally, human survival. Indigenous American writer Leslie Marmon Silko illustrates the necessity of this form of communication in her essay, “Landscape, History, and the Pueblo Imagination.” The essay describes the arid desert environment that is home to her indigenous culture, a landscape in which the flourishing of human habitation cannot be taken for granted, and “any life at all is precious” (1014). “One look and you know that simply to survive is a great triumph,” Silko writes, “that every possible resource is needed, every possible ally – even the most humble insect or reptile. You realise you will be speaking with all of them if you intend to last out the year” (1014).

In the literature of the West, manifestations of pre-Christian animism and indigenous notions of animal voice and guidance are readily recognisable in the talking animals of (traditionally oral) fairytales and fables. The animal characters of European fairytales, while primarily only appearing and disappearing in accordance with their functionality for the human protagonists, held pivotal roles as advisors or guides, with the outcome of the narrative quest often hinging on moments of intra-species conversation between a princess and a speaking cat, a lost child and a bird. “[I]n our fantasies and fairytales,” Joanna Coleman explains, “it is that very act of communication with the non-human upon which success of the quest so often depends” (Coleman). For the human characters of fairytales, like the experience of the indigenous tribes Silko describes, apprehension of more-than-human language and the act of inter-species communication was an unremarkable imperative.

In the sense that the characters of *Maps for the Lost* are searching – for psychological equilibrium, for belonging – a number of the stories in the collection can be seen to be conversant with the quest narratives of fairytales, in which the wisdom of animal or non-human guides is an identifying feature. In “Forest,” like the fox-cub of “Maps for the Lost,” the orphaned devil pup, though conventionally silent, inspires action: for Tomaš in the form of his attempt to physically follow the maps he has created and identified in nature, and for Joe in the form of the creation of wings and his immersion in the forest. After holding the pup, Joe recognises the power or wisdom that is inherent in her alterity, and expresses frustration at not being able to fully comprehend the meaning of the experience: “[t]here’s something about it



that keeps playing on my mind...’ ” he tells Adam, “ ‘Like it meant something that I didn’t understand...Does that make sense? Like there’s something I’ve missed...’ ” (17).

Christopher Manes has argued that the textual silencing of nature in Western culture is systemic. “Nature *is* silent in our culture,” he has written, “...in the sense that the status of being a speaking subject is jealously guarded as an exclusively human prerogative” (339). Where speech has been conventionally positioned as a site of privilege in humanistic discourse in order to further centre / periphery and subject / object divisions, the conveyance of voice and therefore agency to the traditionally silenced, can be read as an act of subversive transgression, with both moral and environmental implications. “For human societies of all kinds,” Manes asserts:

moral consideration seems to fall only within a circle of speakers in communication with one another. We can, thus, safely agree with Hans Peter Duerr when he says that ‘people do not exploit a nature that speaks to them.’ Regrettably, our culture has gone a long way to demonstrate that the converse of this statement is also true. (16)

In her role as environmental protector, the angel of “Forest” is at once voluble and silent, she harnesses the power of both silence and speech. A shape-shifter, she is neither animal nor human nor both, and she is liminal in the sense that she is simultaneously portrayed as actual (a human activist), a dream figure, and (because of the implicit suggestion that her visit to Joe in the forest was not a dream but real) potentially magical. The source of the angel’s effectiveness as an environmental symbol, lies in her nature as transgressive, her religious and mythical resonance or inter-textuality (and thus implicit continuity) and her silence: her (animistic?) withholding of appropriable voice. The narrative describes the impact of her presence at an anti-forestry protest, and the way her esoteric silence contrasts with the conventional human signification of the protester’s words: “On the ground, at the base of the tripod, two activists stretched a banner across the road, but below the angel the words seemed to him to be superfluous, a distraction” (19). The angel’s silence is represented not as *sub*-linguistic - for her ability to speak articulately is revealed in her appearances in the media (“[s]he spoke with passion and conviction. Her opponents condemned her as pretty, though naïve. They didn’t notice the strength of her wings” (19)) but rather *a*- or even *post*-linguistic. The implicit suggestion is that her true strength lies elsewhere, in her silence and in her wings – in her identification as ‘other.’

While traditional representations of nature as the silent and dangerous other are present in *Maps for the Lost*, their conventional implications are subverted. Animals that are conventionally perceived as dangerous, such as the Tasmanian devil and the fox, are presented as passive and vulnerable, while the angel, the eagles, and eventually, Columbine’s garden, are written as indifferent, unpredictable, and at times savage. In “The Skin of the Ocean,” although the true

brutality is explicitly human, Michael's encounter with the shark acts as both reminder of the resistance and impassivity of nature (in the context of environmental vandalism), and a symbol of the unnegotiable differences between the human and non-human realms; the fundamental integrity of inter-species and ecosystemic boundaries, expressed in the form of Michael's epiphanic sense of un-belonging. Conversely (as is recounted by Val Plumwood in *The Eye of the Crocodile*, in which she relates the experience of surviving a near-fatal crocodile attack in Australia's far north), at the same time, the nature of such an attack locates the human body in the more-than-human landscape in the most primal of ways – as animal prey. Despite the intensity of the threat posed by the shark, however, in "The Skin of the Ocean" the greater threat is revealed as being fundamentally human in origin, in the seemingly innocuous guise of a plastic bag.

Despite the difficulties that are inherent in intimate representations of alterity, whether it is the human 'other' in the form of the postcolonial subaltern, or the conventionally silent non-human, the attempt at description and incorporation remains an environmental imperative. The inclusion of animals in a text and, more so, the transition to an animal voice or point of view, at once unsettles and expands an anthropocentric (often monocular) perspective. It creates, as John Simons has observed, "a transgressive route not only across species boundaries, but also between the closed formal universe of the linguistic artefact and into the material world in which it exists" (172).

#### Text / World

When the characters of "Drift" write in the sand, they move the acts of speech and writing away from the abstractions of traditional practice, towards a process which includes, or makes explicit the inclusion of both the landscape and the physical body. By inscribing nature itself, the writing embodies a literal confluence of language and world. Text, like speech, has its locus in the body. The act of reading, as Abram has discerned, "as soon as we attend to its sensorial texture, discloses itself as a profoundly synaesthetic encounter. Our eyes converge on a sequence not of images but of sounds ... further, we should note that this sensory transposition is mediated by the human mouth and tongue" (124). The body creates an isthmus between language and world. In the same way that Carter has challenged the notion that groundedness or locatedness is intellectually reductive, Abram has pointed to the corporeal body as a site of osmosis rather than containment. "To acknowledge that 'I am this body,'" he has written, "... is not to lock up awareness within the density of a bounded object, for ... the boundaries of a living body are open and indeterminate; more like membranes than barriers, they define a

surface of metamorphosis and exchange” (46). In “Drift,” the physical nature of the writing on the beach, replaces the hermetic linearity of conventional text-meaning relations, with a more expansive, participatory practice of embodiment.

When the sensory, corporeal dimension of human language is overlooked, Abram has suggested, language is seen to have “no internal, non-arbitrary connections to [the actual] world, and hence is readily separable from it” (77). Perceptions of language as an abstract system of conventionally determined signs, taken to extremis by postmodern deconstruction, have both intentionally and incidentally contributed to the ideological subjugation of non-human nature. When hegemonic language is abstracted from its real-world referents, it supports the ideological and material privileging of the cognitive (as the perceived site of language) over the physical, and concepts of language as exclusively human.

The nature and ethical implications of the relation between linguistic representation and the material landscape, has been a significant source of philosophical tension among and between the practitioners of ecocriticism and the wider theoretical community. Buell has noted the unfashionability of raising “the ancient question of the mimetic status of literary texts” (“Insurgency” 706) in a post-structuralist climate, and has called for a middle ground in representational theory, in which positions of naïve realism or radical disjunction are avoided, and text holds instead what he has described as “a dual accountability to matter and discursive mentation” (*Imagination* 92). In his ecocritical study of the Romantic poets, Jonathan Bate has observed the asymptotic nature of the text-world relation. While Heideggerian phenomenology pursued the collapse of Cartesian dualism and thus the achievement of authentic ‘dwelling’ through poetry, Romanticism lamented a final, insurmountable division between language and the represented world. “The ontology of the poetic,” Bate has written:

is more divided than Heidegger supposed: his ecopoetic proposes that the presence of the poem is an overcoming of the Cartesian division between thinking mind ... and embodied substance ... but, as the Romantics knew, it cannot really be that. The poetic articulates both presence and absence: it is both the imaginary recreation and the trace on the sand which is all that remains of the wind itself. The Poetic is divided because it may be thought of as ecological in two senses: it is either (both?) a language (*logos*) that restores us to our home (*oikos*) or (and?) a melancholy recognising that our only home (*oikos*) is language (*logos*). (59)

Like the membranes of the body, and the borders of postcolonial maps, the boundaries that delineate language and world are both permeable and actual, and the relationship between them is one of continuity and distinction. When language can be understood as a conduit between the

conscious mind and the material landscape, it is in the knowledge of the subjective nature of both representation and experience, and the independent integrity of the sub-linguistic realm. Citing David Seamon, Hay has observed that there are potentially “‘as many phenomenologies as there are things, events and experiences in the world’” (*Main Currents* 143). “Phenomenological disclosure,” he has written, “remains open, recognising that understanding is of the moment, a merely temporary gestalt. No articulation can entirely enclose an essence; no explanation can fully and immutably exhaust meaning” (*Main Currents* 143). The nature of phenomenological representation is, in this sense, inherently paradoxical. As a writer committed to reducing falsely and ideologically premised objectivity in representations of nature, Lopez believes in the communicative potential of language that has the open-endedness of metaphor, which practises both holistic immersion and observational reflection. Yet, as Bate has noted, while ecologically conscious writers seek to bridge the text-world dichotomy, they do so in the knowledge of the asymptotical nature of the reconciliation. It is a fragile negotiation, and an underlying tension between sub-linguistic participation and the art of representation, is frequently present in environmental texts.

In his discussion of postcolonial strategies for re-describing colonial landscapes, Kroetsch has described “the problem of language” (396): the difficulty, for the postcolonial writer, of escaping the concealed genealogies of their inherited lexicon. “At one time,” he has written, “I considered it the task of the Canadian writer to give names to his experiences, to be the namer. I now suspect that, on the contrary, it is his task to un-name” (396). Where poetic (and postcolonial) naming, like representational phenomenology, seeks to provide a more inchoate, fluid alternative to rationalistic nomenclature, the connection between the name and the named remains asymptotically elusive, and the true imperative of counter-colonial practice is perhaps more a process of *de*-scribing than *re*-describing. The tension between the process of re-imagining the postcolonial landscape, and the desire to evade definition, is of pivotal significance to both postcolonial and environmental creativity. As Lopez and Coles have noted, regions of syncretic tension are imbued with fertile possibility, and in a sense it is this very tension – between the name and the named – that demonstrates most fully the ecological consciousness to which the nature-oriented text aspires.

In his discussion of Buell’s use of Francis Ponge’s term ‘*adequation*’ to describe the impressionistic ability of writing to ‘represent’ external reality, Tredinnick has observed that it is the text or creative artefact that, rather than affecting a mimetic realism, draws attention to its own partiality through its stylistic non-literality, that most accurately invokes the multi-dimensional landscape. “Paradoxically,” he has written:

it is precisely to the extent that a piece of nature writing is not merely representational, not merely a matter of informing, reporting and dwelling upon, that it may represent nature, that it may catch and embody the nature of the place it engages with; and point us out of the text toward the world. (124)

*Adequation*, Tredinnick has suggested, is the nature or quality of a text that gives “the gist, the sense, the essence of a landscape ... without pretending to *be* the place or even to *show* it to you exactly” (124). It is the inchoate, the layered, and the invisible in creativity that locates it most fully in the ecological landscape. By recognising the fractured and subjective nature of human perception, and attending to plurality and movement in the representational artefact, the boundaries that separate the artefact or text from the world remain permeable and open. Where Buell’s “dual accountability” (*Imagination* 92) is present in textual representation, the interaction between referent and actual is enhanced, rather than inhibited, and realism is revealed as a practice of occlusion rather than mirroring.

While areas of ecocritical study and literary scholarship as a whole are centred upon visual or descriptive theories of representation, Tredinnick has suggested that the notion of *adequation* takes textual theorising and practice beyond the “visualist limitations” (126) of representation, towards a more expansive, auditory comprehension of the written word. As Abram has identified, attention to the sensory, synaesthetic nature of both writing and reading practice opens a text out into the extra-textual landscape. In this way, where the auditory, lyric qualities of words are emphasised, linguistic creativity can be seen to acquire an ecological dimension in its relational engagement with the external world. Where a landscape is acoustically as well as optically perceived, the ordered linearity that supports hegemonic boundaries is replaced by a more openly subjective, immediate and participatory apprehension. Carter has suggested that in order to evoke and resonate with a landscape composed of relationships, it is necessary for a work to embody a “metrical” engagement with place (*Lie* 5). For the characters of “Drift,” the literal meaning of the writing they find on the sand is indecipherable, and the significance of the language lies not in its nature as a system of signs, but in its qualities of *adequation*: in the textures, sounds and patterns of words.

### “Presence”

The “Presence” sequence of Les Murray’s *Translations From the Natural World*, engages in a process of phenomenological naming, an exploration of “‘being and beings,’” as George Sessions puts it (qtd in Oelschlaeger, *Wilderness* 340), that is at once a celebration of non-verbal immanence, an extension and recognition of voice in a world that has remained beyond

conventional articulation, and an act of translation that is informed by the ecological imagination. The act of linguistic naming originated within indigenous creation narratives, in which the relation between language and the natural world is one of symbiotic reciprocity, and the Judeo-Christian tradition of Adamic identification. The naming of the non-human world, as a poetic invocation or a baptismal application of nomenclature in which there is an explicit power-relation, can be either (or both) a contextualising process of reconciliation between language and being, or a site of anthropocentric appropriation.

Anurag Sharma has described Murray as “one of a handful of poets writing in English today who are busy in exploring the far recesses of their land and language” (58). “It is through exploration of the landscape,” she writes, “and expression of a sense of belonging to it, that one may realise and even construct an identity for oneself” (58). The relation between the external and internal landscapes and its central importance to formations of identity on both an individual and collective level, informs the dissolution of conceptual boundaries that is predominant in Murray’s writing. Martin Leer, in his discussion of the poem “This Country is My Mind,” observes that for Murray “the external landscape is more central to the experiencing consciousness than anything he carries internalised in his head: the persona’s self is dependent upon setting; the existing landscape is mindscape, memoryscape and dreamscape” (“Country” 15). Yet, rather than overtly privileging the physical landscape over the internal mind, or the opposite, Murray is a writer concerned with the unsettlement of dualism, and focuses instead on the reciprocity and convergence of the internal-external relation. The imaginative nexus between place and self is for Murray a relationship of symbiosis and interconnection (“man does and will change country as much out of creativity as out of physical need” (Murray as qtd in Matthews 157)), thus holding an ecological and political dimension which is of pivotal significance to any ecocritical reading of his work.

Art at its highest potential, Murray has written, in the manner of phenomenological representation, involves a fusion between the two main modes of human consciousness, between the realm of thought and abstraction and that of the imagination or dream. “To be real,” Murray suggests, a poem has to be at once truly thought and truly dreamed, and the fusion between the two represents the insipient wholeness of thinking and life” (qtd in Sharma 18). Poetry, then, in its sensory reciprocity, in its yoking of the waking intellect and the symbolic dream-state of the imagination, can become a kind of “wholespeak” (Murray, *Paperbark* 345), a language operating “at full stretch, with all its resources of nuance and overtone and quasi-musical resonance, and also with all its daylight resources of precision and the capacity to catch the sheer this-ness of things, in ways that make them unforgettable” (Murray, *Persistence* 93). It is the poetic evocation of the “this-ness of things,” of life and presence in all its protean idiosyncrasy, to which Murray turns his attention in “Presence.”

Murray's open-ended engagement with the vernacular and with voice in literature is a realisation of Michael McDowell's ecocritical reading of Bakhtin's 'dialogics,' in which the multiplicity and reciprocity of voice in the text enables an egalitarian dialectic that is, by extension, of formative significance to ecocritical notions of speaking *with* and *for* nature. In the "Presence" poems, accusations of appropriative ventriloquism are undermined by the poetry's destabilisation of the conceptual boundaries that inform human-nature and self-other dualisms, and by its self-reflexive positioning as a work of translation.

Extension of self and sympathy to the natural world, and its consequential negation of human-centred solipsism, is philosophically articulated by deep ecologist Arne Naess's principles of 'Self-Realisation,' through which the parameters of identity are expanded and/or dissolved. In the poems of "Presence," despite an apparent distillation of identity and individuality, speaking positions and subjectivity remain unstable and indistinct, suggesting a simultaneous comprehension of holism and individual autonomy. Deep ecologists George Sessions and Bill Devall have written of the dual level of awareness through which (holistic) existence is made ethically functional: "there are no boundaries and everything is interrelated. But insofar as we perceive things as individual organisms and identities, the insight draws us to respect all human and non-human individuals in their own right as parts of the whole" (223). A true ecological consciousness, then, offers a synthesis in which both the quiddity or subjectivity of being, and its holistic interconnectedness are acknowledged.

In Murray's "Presence," the animate natural world is articulate and multi-lingual – molluscs, ticks, grasses – the smallest being speaks and is worthy of translation. The poet occupies the role of interpreter, maintaining and enhancing the porosity of human - non-human boundaries through a process of profoundly intra-lingual translation, and the medium of human language. In "Insect Mating Flight," a phenomenologically intimate 'external' observation shifts mid-poem into the internal voice of the insect: "breathing and upholding him, Ee sings: / *with our chew eyewords whim / moth reed haze racing vane, / butts hum and buoy or, fairer moan, / expencil eye fits elf, is gain*" (*Translations* 18). The lexical peculiarity of the translated language, the eeriness of its rhythm and syntax emphasises the condition of otherness, of "creaturliness and of individuality" (Matthews 121) that is conveyed through a deliberate and necessary process of de-familiarisation in the work, and through which the hazards of anthropocentric ease of translation are abated. In their intricate focus on the singularity and Bakhtinian plurality of voice, the "Presence" poems have a sonic resonance and aural / oral nature that is elemental to Murray's work of naming.

In “Contour-Line by Contour,” Leer writes of the shift in meaning that is a consequence of Murray’s phenomenological participation within the auditory world, “[t]he difference between a landscape visually and a landscape acoustically perceived is profound ... Vision orders an outside world stretched out in front of you; hearing puts you in the centre of a surrounding world ... Every idea, every form, shifts meaning in the move from a landscape shaped by the eye to one apprehended by the ear” (“Contour” 250). In the poem “Lyre Bird,” the rhythmic intensity of a sonic landscape is evoked through Murray’s mimicry of the mimic, in which “she-dingo,” “kettle-boil,” “human talk” and “chainsaw” are cheekily imitated (21). Reminding the reader of the reciprocity of translation – “human talk: eedieAi and uddyunnunoan” (21) – and thus the subjectivity and multiplicity of language and meaning, “Lyre Bird” has an onomatopoeic musicality and internal rhyme structure that performs the auditory mimicry of its subject which, in the words of Bert Almon, “turns the poem into an echo chamber” (124). The singular and often intellectually indecipherable voices of the natural world have a holistic auditory resonance that Murray has described as “wild sound:” “that low, aggregate susurrus that emanates from living landscape” (“Human Hair” 564). The process of synaesthesia, as Abram has discerned, shifts the meaning of the written language from the perceived hermetic, linear objectivity of the text-meaning relation, towards a more expansive, participatory relation of sensory embodiment. Murray’s “Presence” is concerned with an expression of the immanence of the speaking ‘object’ of the poem, but equally with the potential for sensory reciprocity in the reading ‘subject.’ Through an exploration of embodiment and the sensory resonance of the poetic medium, the work unsettles traditional subject-object boundaries that are predicated on Cartesian dualism, and reinforced through verbal abstraction.

Through the process of phenomenological naming and embodiment, the “Presence” poems begin to apprehend a level of being that has remained beyond conventional articulation. Poems such as “Migratory” imaginatively *inhabit* an instinct, an evolutionary “rightness” or “right-feeling” that exceeds the capabilities of the language of empirical observation: “I am the right feeling on washed shine / beak-focused: the feeling of here, that stays and stays, then lengthens out over / the hill of hills and the feedy sea” (52). “Mollusc” employs repetitive sound-patterning, the language of intimate and idiosyncratic vitality and a form that imitates the faltering progression of its subject in its “minutely-articulated” (Crawford 66) invocation of the ancient mollusc: “itself ornament to the weave of presence” (Murray, *Translations* 26). Yet, despite the originality of the poems, Murray’s commitment to equanimity and convergence is enacted through the eclectic hybridity of the sequence’s generic influences, in which the Australian Jindyworobak movement and indigenous animism and totemism are merged with the bestiary tradition of medieval England, and what Robert Crawford calls the “exotic linguistic



plumage” (62) of Gerard Manley Hopkins. Formally, the poems comprise a hybridised traditionalism and enactive singularity, in which the sonnet is metamorphosed to the point at which it becomes unrecognisable, yet remains uncannily familiar.

In a literary landscape inflected by the conceptual open-endedness of postmodernism and postcoloniality, the convergences and transgressions of Murray’s “Presence” are reflexively conscious of their inability (and final unwillingness) to provide a totalising alternative to binary segregations. In “From Where we Live on Presence,” the subjectivity of beetlehood is translated into a linguistic articulation of being, yet both beetle and poet are aware of the fundamental insufficiency of such translation, and the inherent paradox of phenomenological representation. The embodied beetle thus resists appropriation into language: “I could not have put myself better, / with more lustre, than my presence did. I translate into segments, / laminates / cachou eyes, pungent chemistry, cusps. But I remain the true word for / me” (Murray, *Translations* 53). By stretching the language we reveal its limits, its breaking points, and despite reciprocity and interconnectedness, text and world remain essentially distinct.

Among the poems of “Presence,” embodiment, orality and phenomenological immersion combine to create a landscape of imaginative otherness, a landscape which holds an asymptotic relation to poetic representation, which approaches yet resists linguistic containment. Of “Possum’s Nocturnal Day,” Steven Matthews has observed that in the final lines of the poem: “I curl up in my charcoal trunk of night / and dream a welling pictureless encouragement / that tides from far but is in arrival me / and my world, since nothing is apart enough for language” (Murray, *Translations* 54), the sequence “becomes haunted by the possibility that language itself marks humanity’s fallen state” (125). “In other words,” he writes, “the Manichean loss of creatureliness / creativity is a mark of our own apartness” (Matthews 125). At the concluding point of the sequence, the poem marks an explicit shift away from individualistic representation and baptismal naming (“cough scoff at other Only Ones” (Murray, *Translations* 54) and thus from the assumptions of Murray’s translations, towards the holistic dreamstate of the pre-linguistic realm.

As Abram has argued, perceptions of language as being “purely abstract” (79), and thus “readily separable” (77) from the substantial world are necessary to further anthropocentric notions of language as exclusively human. This impression of language, of which there is no correlate in the oral cultures of indigeneity, occludes the “sensuous, evocative dimension of human discourse” (Abram 79), the dialogical corporeality of voice which transcends human / non-human divisions, and resonates through Murray’s translations. “The chorus of frogs gurgling in unison at the edge of a pond,” Abram has written:

the snarl of a wildcat as it springs upon its prey ... all reverberate with affective, gestural significance, the same significance that vibrates through our own conversations and soliloquies, moving us at times to tears, or to anger, or to intellectual insights ... Language as a bodily phenomenon accrues to *all* expressive bodies, not just to the human. Our own speaking, then, does not set us outside of the animate landscape but – whether or not we are aware of it – inscribes us more fully in its chattering, whispering, soundful depths. (80)

The sensory, intuitive dimension of the language of “Presence,” and its asymptotic proximity to the immanence it aspires to poetically affirm, incites a movement towards the inchoate, inclusive phenomenological expression that has characterised the oral traditions of indigeneity. Yet the sequence is possessed by an undercurrent of loss as well as recovery, nostalgia as well as possibility.

Through his unsettlement of conceptual and linguistic boundaries, engagement with the contextualised vernacular and focus on quiddity, embodiment and voice, Murray creates a poetry of convergence, and a world from which, as in the indigenous creativity from which he takes inspiration, art is not estranged but remains interconnected and vital. Of naming and notions of language as estrangement, Hugh Dunkerley, quoting American poet Mark Doty, has written: “language isn’t a case of giving already differentiated subjects names, nor is it a prison house from which we must escape. Rather ... it ‘must necessarily be seen as a ‘reaching beyond’ into an incompletely-articulated extra-linguistic ‘presence’” (78). The relation between humanity and language is ancient and contingent, and the attempted creation of ecologically-minded writing involves a search for ways in which the disjunction between language and experience can be lessened, while acknowledging the intrinsic integrity of the natural world. Such is Murray’s undertaking of the process of phenomenological naming, which posits an alternative language of reconciliation and convergence, a language which recognises the contiguity and distinctness within the world to which it belongs. For Murray, it is a world which welcomes translation based on interconnection, but which resists imaginative appropriation, and remains the “true word” (*Translations* 53) for itself.

## Chapter Three

### The Imagination

“The perceptions of a people wash over the land like a flood,  
leaving ideas hung up in the brush, like pieces of damp paper  
to be collected and deciphered. No one can tell the whole story.”

Barry Lopez, *Arctic Dreams* 273

“The girl convinced herself that only the mad people  
in the world would tell you the truth when madness was the truth,  
when the truth itself was mad.”

Alexis Wright, *The Swan Book* 73

Of the creative tension between fragmentation and patterning that is inherent in the contemporary fairytale, Christine Park and Caroline Heaton have written, that the way such narratives:

use echoes, hints, allusions to fairytales appears representative of the present time where knowledge is so often culled from a multiplicity of sources. Tension between the desire to pattern and the seeming impossibility of patterning, in an age where the old certainties have died, informs the structure and often subject matter of many tales.

Some mourn and strain after a sense of lost wholeness; others allude to the fairytale as a way of hinting at its re-discovery... (xii)

While the political strategies of many of the stories in *Maps for the Lost* can be loosely identified within the genre of nature writing, they are thematically and stylistically more conversant with the modern fairytale. In “Maps for the Lost,” Iluka’s story is inflected with the old folktale of “The Handless Maiden,” and many of the stories gesture towards or explicitly engage in elements of magic realism, evoking the kind of dynamic landscapes that, as Lopez has discerned, can easily be perceived as magical. Where the two genres intersect is in their shared commitment to ancient, and seemingly continuous subterranean patterns: the archetypal and magical in fairytales, and the ecological in the nature text. While, as Park and Heaton have identified, in the context of postmodern theory, “the desire to pattern” (xii) is a source of

imaginative and stylistic tension, postmodernity, and the dislocation that is at the heart of postcoloniality, have created a new, *ecological* understanding of the nature of fragmentation.

### Patterning

In “Maps for the Lost” and “Seeds” the patterns of memory, identity and human connection are stimulated by seemingly isolated experiences of nature and place. Tomaš’ relationship with the absent Iluka is distilled into scents and tones that are apprehended by the sensing body, and shaped into patterns of memory by the imagining mind. For the diasporic subject of “Seeds,” whose lost memory and nomadic past coalesce in the shapes and colours of a garden, the inchoate fragment, like a shard of her broken china, is replete with meaning. In his essay “Imaginary Homelands,” Rushdie has described the condition of the writer in exile, the diaspora who has lost access to the illusory wholeness of the remembered country. Like the past, the distant homeland is constructed through fragments of memory, through the trace that is a correlate and consequence of loss. Trace, as such, takes on symbolic meaning – becomes incandescent in its investment with metaphoric and associative connection. In this sense, then, the nature of fragmentation, of the “broken mirrors” (12) and memories of the past, coheres with concepts of the provisional present, and the ruptured discontinuity that is inherent in human perception. “Human beings do not perceive things whole,” Rushdie has written, “we are not gods but wounded creatures, cracked lenses, capable of only fractured perceptions... Meaning is a shaky edifice we build out of scraps, dogmas, childhood injuries, newspaper articles, chance remarks, old films, small victories, people hated, people loved ...” (12). When perception is understood as partial and contingent, the imaginative and subjective processes of synthesis that underpin meaning are disclosed. While in literature, the discontinuous image is often invested with intertextual resonance, and thus acquires a kind of hidden continuity, in ecocritical thought, the symbolic nature of the fragment precipitates movement across *actual* as well as textual landscapes. Meaning travels through, and is created within, an animate, interconnected ecosystem: through topographies of earth and oxygen, rather than the certitude of abstract space.

In postcolonial thought, the synthesising process of knowledge production has been likened to the process of archaeology, a practice that, unlike the presumptions of hegemonic history, reflexively acknowledges the provisional nature of its vision, and thus allows meaning to remain essentially open. Derek Walcott has noted the potential of the poetic imagination to remake the fractured identities and histories of the postcolonial landscape. The process of poetry, he has written, “conjugates both tenses simultaneously; the present and the past, if the past is the sculpture and the present the beads of dew or rain on the forehead of the past. There

is the buried language and the individual vocabulary, and the process of poetry is one of excavation and self-discovery” (506). What Walcott has identified is the reconciliatory, often syncretic, and at times subversive power of artesian creativity. In many of the stories, the protagonists attain a kind of psychological equilibrium by shaping their immanent lives and distant experience into the coherence of patterns. In “Maps for the Lost,” for Tomaš, the globe is not only a visual expression of his political dissent, but also a way of working through grief, and enhancing his connection to the natural world. Lopez has described the role of patterning, in the form of an intimate, and “storied” attachment to place, as “a fundamental defence against human loneliness” (“Literature” 11). In “Drift,” the process of writing in the sand becomes a way of re-ordering states of psychological dissociation, and overcoming alienation by connecting with place. For Amir, who has been physically exiled, the writing is a way of communicating with an unfamiliar landscape, a means of forming intimate connections of knowledge and experience through the patterning of imagination and the re-enforcement of ritual.

In “This Butterfly,” two homeless children find a source of coherence and escape from their fractured lives among the butterflies of the London butterfly house. For Miles, each individual butterfly is replete with meaning, a symbol and embodiment of continuity and order, and of the extraordinary diversity and scope of the world from which he has been excluded. Butterflies are environmentally significant for their vital role as pollinators, their susceptibility to subtle changes in the environment and current rates of decline. Their beauty, fragility, silence, heterogeneity, mobility and dramatic metamorphoses make them an appealing subaltern symbol.

Barbara Kingsolver’s 2012 novel, *Flight Behaviour*, explores the moral, personal and environmental consequences of the unprecedented arrival of thousands of monarch butterflies, which settle like a “lake of fire” (18) across the forests of a farming town in America’s Appalachia, after their trans-continental migration is disrupted by the changing climate. Through her detailed study of the imperilled insects, their impact upon the woman who finds them and on the small, conservative community in which she lives, and the consequences of the signifying event for the broader community and global environment, Kingsolver’s novel creates a parabolic vision of the nature of the climate crisis. While raising questions of individual and societal responsibility in the era of global warming, and the vast discrepancies that exist in the cultural interpretation of scientific evidence, *Flight Behaviour* initiates a conversation about perspective and the construction of meaning: the process of drawing globally significant conclusions from the behaviour of a single species at a particular moment in space and time, and the complexity and final inscrutability of extrapolations of this nature. Like the scientific

discourse which informs much of its narrative, Kingsolver's novel reveals the simultaneous need for and inherent difficulties of incorporating the partial or contingent moment into the production of meaning that is global in scope, a necessity which has grown ever more urgent in the context of the warming planet. "The novel depicts" Deborah Lilley explains:

what Ursula Heise, in *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet* (2008), has called 'a cultural moment in which an entire planet becomes graspable as one's own local backyard' (4). At the same time, it makes plain the complexity of Heise's observation in practice, belying the simplicity of her description. By way of the realisation of the ironies of climate change, which in Timothy Clark's words, 'bizarrely link the intensifying devastation of the world with such things as a person's day-to-day driving, shopping or eating habits' (2010, 48), the novel captures the unintelligibility of the global scope that Heise describes. ("Critical Environments")

Love has investigated the relation between holism and reduction in scientific method, and its potential application to ecocritical practice. "Holistic thinking is necessary, even indispensable," he explains, "but it must also anticipate all the eventualities of a complex system, for which reductionist techniques may be required" (*Practical* 43). The ecological imagination aspires towards a synthesis of expansive holism – or thinking in terms of patterns and systems – and reductionist, local focus, with the practice of the latter creating "points of entry into otherwise impenetrably complex systems" (*Practical* 43). Biologist Edward O. Wilson suggests that, though each informs the other, the privileging of complexity over simplicity on some level is inevitable, yet in science the role of reductionism is understood as fundamental, while in artistic endeavour it is, or has traditionally been, more readily dismissed. "Complexity is what interests scientists in the end, not simplicity," Wilson writes. "Reductionism is the way to understand it. The love of complexity without reductionism makes art; the love of complexity with reductionism makes science" (qtd in Love, *Practical* 43). The challenge for the ecologically-minded theorist and creative is to attempt to soften this distinction.

### Natural Order

In "This Butterfly," for Miles, the potency of the butterflies transcends their encoded symbolism. His literal interpretation of the Butterfly Effect - mathematician Edward Lorenz's widely referenced, often misinterpreted theory that small changes in initial conditions, exemplified by the beat of a butterfly's wing, can cause remote and large scale effects – inspires in him the belief that one individual butterfly (within the butterfly house which has come to represent the wider world) may embody enormous transformative potential, and therefore

signify a means of escape. While Miles' literal interpretation of the metaphor is flawed – for chaos theory, of which the butterfly effect is one aspect, presents a world of such intricate determinism, or patterns of cause and effect, that they are essentially un-navigable – his response to both the metaphorical idea and imperceptible reality of the patterning that is present in nature, is visceral. Hay describes the syncretic relation of order and chaos as it is presented by modern science. “[C]haos,” he writes, “waits just below the surface gloss of order, ready to pull apart any apparent state of equilibrium. Yet, within this condition of flux, of random shift, a more profound and intangible order is still to be discerned. Chaos and order are, then, not incompatible, but coexistential within a larger whole” (*Main Currents* 130).

The imaginative appeal of the butterfly effect theory or, more specifically, Lorenz's metaphor, is apparent in the unusual degree of its dissemination beyond the scientific community in which it originated. What the theory describes, as Carl Matheson and Evan Kirchhoff explain, is a system that is “entirely predetermined” but “unpredictable in practice” (36). While naïve interpretations of chaos theory tend to over-look the former (determinism), in interpretations of the butterfly effect, it is the nature of the latter (unpredictability) which is frequently obscured. The theory's unique popularity, and the often flawed interpretations of its implications, expose, as Peter Dizikes explains, the “growing chasm between what the public expects from scientific research - that is, a series of ever more precise answers about the world we live in - and the realms of uncertainty into which modern science is taking us” (“Butterfly”). Yet this metaphorical articulation of the world arguably fills a gap that exists in both language and understanding.

As previously discussed, the extrapolation of scientific theories into the field of literary studies (as into culture as a whole), can present significant challenges. Not in the least, in the instance of chaos theory, because of the symbolic and emotive power of the word ‘chaos’ itself. N.Katherine Hayles, whose *Chaos Bound: Orderly Disorder in Contemporary Literature and Science* posits parallels between the theory of chaos and cultural scholarship's postmodern deconstruction, observes a fundamental discrepancy between postmodern and scientific interpretations of the term. “For deconstructionists, chaos repudiates order,” she writes, “for scientists, chaos makes order possible” (*Chaos Bound* 184). For Hayles, the legitimacy or illegitimacy of interdisciplinary applications of the scientific theory is not easily determined. “Often the debate comes down to questions of language,” she writes. “Should terms appropriated from chaos theory be confined to their technical denotation, or is it valid to use them metaphorically or analogically?” (*Chaos and Order* 15). Where the butterfly effect provides a clear example of the hazards of such engagement, informed and reflexive discussion

of this acutely significant vision and ordering of the universe, metaphorical or otherwise, has a legitimate and important role to play in cultural responses to nature.

Within an ecocritical framework, both metaphor and theory provide an encompassing example of the way groundedness, or attention to local detail, can inspire imaginative trajectory across physical, temporal and textual landscapes. While for Beth, the attraction of nature, represented by the butterflies, is oblitative – chaotic in its most fundamental sense – for Miles, the butterflies form part of a subliminal map, demonstrating a process of synthesis that conceives of the world as an interconnected whole, and informs the ecological imagination. Although the science of chaos has shown us this map is un-navigable, the knowledge that there is a kind of incomprehensible subterranean coherence in nature remains, and it is partly to that unfathomable coherence – that trace – that we humans intuitively, and imaginatively, respond.

Smith articulates the role of modern science and cultural relativism in our collective understanding of global warming, and the tension between modernity's deconstruction of overarching theories, and our relationship with the climate. "[We'd] been through a century of relativism and deconstruction," she writes:

in which we were informed that most of our fondest-held principles were either uncertain or simply wishful thinking, and in many areas of our lives we had already been asked to accept that nothing is essential and everything changes – and this had taken the fight out of us somewhat. And then it's important to remember that the necessary conditions of our lives – those things that seem to us unavoidably to be the case – are not only debated by physicists and philosophers but exist, irrationally, in the minds of the rest of us, beneath contempt intellectually perhaps, but we still experience them as permanent facts.

The climate was one of those facts. We did not think it could change. ("Elegy")

In an era of quantum physics and postmodern fragmentation, the human longing for certainty, stability and continuity, endures. For many the need is still answerable in religion, but the transcendent continuity of the natural world – our dependence on its sometimes rhythmic, sometimes indiscernible coherence – is surely even more fundamental. Yet, as Smith observes, there is tension there, for we realise we are on shaky ground, and during a period in which decisive action is paramount, the impacts of such doubt are debilitating.

Ecological interconnection provides a lens by which we can glimpse the barely conceivable complexity of the (dis-)ordered universe. The myriad ways species and habitats interact are still little understood by science. In a world in which it is estimated current rates of extinction are now between one thousand and ten thousand times higher than the background (pre-human) extinction rate, only a small percentage of species have yet been formally identified, and many



of their exacting and potentially vital roles will not be determined until after they are lost (De Vos et al.).

It is notable that our language has few words to describe this natural order, and its webs of intricate connections, and fewer still to describe the absences that remain once they are gone. In Australian indigenous cultures, the ancient, invisible paths and contours of migrations, habitats and interactions between species are known as ‘song-lines.’ There is no comparable word in English.

In ‘Unravelling,’ a puppeteer and his daughter imagine the networks of ecological interconnection as a series of finely interwoven threads which have been severed and entangled by the effects of the warming climate. The story is an attempt to animate those connections, to make visible what is so vital, but so easily over-looked. Yet knowledge, at a time of environmental collapse, comes at a high price, and Eva warns her daughter not to look too closely, not to try to keep everything in mind, as her father has done.

Flanagan’s essay “The Lost World,” describes the severing of ecological relationships, and the simultaneous loss of isolation – of islandness – that is a consequence of the warming world. One of the paradoxes of the changing climate is its ability both to fracture ecosystems and inter-species correspondence, and simultaneously threaten diversity and the integrity of natural delineations. “In front, forty-spotted pardalotes sport in the white gum trees,” Flanagan writes, of the view from the window of his shack on southern Tasmania’s Bruny Island.

They live off the sugary secretions on the trees’ underleaves, but because of global warming the white gums are dying. Of these tiny birds, no bigger than the giant moths that come out at evening, fewer than a thousand remain. In a decade they may be gone.

The fences that once kept the fairy penguins from nesting beneath the house are gone, because the last of the penguins failed to return six years ago. No one knows why. All that remains is a closed gate.

Below are sandstone bluffs and kelp-wracked beaches reeking of forbidden things. Gone too from the sea here are fish like the trevally and cod and trumpeter. No one can explain that either. Sometimes I dive on the shallow reefs here, looking for words...

Bruni d’Entrecasteaux, perhaps in fear, or wonder, or both, called Bruny Island a place “separated from the rest of the universe.”

No more though. (“Lost World”)

Through the observations of the sixteenth-century French explorer d'Entrecasteaux, Flanagan conveys the degree of the changes that have occurred in the Tasmanian landscape since European exploration, and the colonising reach of the changing climate. As McKibben laments, one of the many deleterious effects of the warming world is the loss of its heterogeneity, its difference. "[I]t is as if we had put a huge lamp in the sky," he writes, "and cast the same prosaic, sterile light at all times on all places" (*End* 51). When the effects of climate change transgress natural boundaries, biodiversity is threatened by habitat loss and the impacts of invasive species, and the consequence is homogenisation: the end of islands. Ecological science, of course, has taught us that no landscape, species or island is ever truly separate, nor have they been in the past, but the connections that were there – the finely wrought networks that have evolved over millenia – are being stripped of their diversity and distinction. The conclusion to "Unravelling" – "There is an ocean, there is an island, there is a man, there is a girl" – though reassuring, is in this sense an illusion, a moment of puppetry or theatrical trick, because there are no longer islands, not in the sense that we once knew, not isolated from the world in the way that d'Entrecasteaux understood.

### Continuity

McKibben has described the human attraction to the sense of continuity and ancient temporality that is exhibited in nature, an attraction that is enhanced rather than diminished by our growing awareness of its complexity, and that is threatened by the fracturing and transformational effects of the changing climate. "[T]he world displays a lovely order," he writes, "an order comforting in its intricacy. And the most appealing part of this harmony, perhaps, is its permanence – the sense that we are part of something with roots stretching back nearly forever, and branches reaching forward nearly as far" (*End* 62). It is important to remember that knowledge of the nature of geological time, of the ancientness of the world, is relatively new to Western thinking. After witnessing eighteenth-century geologist James Hutton's discoveries at Scotland's Siccar Point, findings which challenged prevailing thought concerning the age of the Earth, mathematician John Playfair wrote: "[t]he mind seemed to grow giddy by looking so far into the abyss of time ... we became sensible of how much further reason may sometimes go than imagination may venture to follow" (qtd in Wellend 213). It is a succinct articulation of the gap that exists between scientific knowledge and the Western imagination. In the twenty-first century, the Western consciousness is only beginning to grapple with geological time, yet now the natural continuity that is at its heart is shifting. While, as McKibben has identified, we are comforted, or have been comforted by the idea of such continuity, we have failed to adequately comprehend our relationship to it. Though climate change predictions are concerned not with

vast, geological time-frames but with human-scale decades and centuries, and many of its consequences are already upon us, this inability to conceive of time and of the future remains deeply relevant to the crisis. Further to this, is our demonstrable failure to consider this future in ethical terms.

Citing David Wood, Clark identifies the philosophical nexus between the loss of independent nature that characterises the Anthropocene, and the profound shift in temporal awareness that climate change demands. “Philosopher David Wood writes of one facet of the current global situation as the *loss of externality*,” Clark observes:

One of the traditional functions of the concept of nature has been to name a space of supposed externality, not just as the other of culture, but more literally its outside: ‘Now there is no outside, no space for expansion ... no ‘out’ or ‘away’ ... . Yet so much of our making sense, let alone the intelligibility of our actions, still rests on being able to export, exclude, externalise what we do not want to consider. When that externality is no longer available, we are in trouble.’ (“Nature” 82)

Such externalities, writes Clark, include “the sea, the atmosphere, people outside the ‘developed countries,’ and above all, the future,” and the loss of their separateness, or distinction, means the end of a conceptual (and *actual*) space in which the consequences of human activity can be sequestered or discarded (“Nature” 82). In this sense, by demanding attention to the future, the climate crisis at once unsettles linear notions of time, and problematises the oppositional dualisms which support conventional thought.

In indigenous Australian cultures, the awareness of temporal continuity is integral, and is intrinsically connected to a sense of belonging to place. Unlike Western interpretations of time, however, this Aboriginal comprehension of continuity is non-linear. The Aboriginal concept of the ‘Dreamtime,’ Abram has written,

does not refer to the past in any literal sense (to a time that is finished and done with), but rather to the temporal and psychological latency of the enveloping landscape [...]. The Dreamtime [...] is integral to the spatial surroundings. It is not a set of accomplished events located in some finished past, but the very depth of the experiential present. (193)

In eco-critical thought, notions of temporal equanimity, in which neither past nor present is fore-grounded, nor relegated, enter the phenomenological territory of philosophers Martin Heidegger, Edmund Husserl and Merleau-Ponty, whose work attempted to collapse the perpetual space-time dualism of post-Enlightenment rationalism, a dualism that is, not incidentally, absent from indigenous thought. For Murray, this “perpetual dimension” (*Bounty* 72) in the landscape, or what Gary Clark refers to as the “deep past” (35) of evolution and

alternative temporality, and its instrumental relation to belonging, is evoked in his poem, “Thinking About Aboriginal Land Rights, I Visit the Farm I Will Not Inherit.”

The ambient day-tides contain every mouldering oil  
that the bush would need to come back right this day,  
not suddenly, but all down the farm slopes, the polished shell barks  
flaking, leaves noon-thin, with shale stones and orchids at foot  
and the creek a hung gallery again, and the bee trees unrobbed.  
By sundown it is dense dusk, all the tracks closing in.

I go into the earth near the feed shed for thousands of years. (*Bounty* 97)

The poem expresses both the obliterating potential of the forest landscape – its almost unfathomable temporality - and the transcendent belonging that is facilitated by a knowing and embodied interconnectedness, sensing at once the vulnerability and possibility of human belonging. As Murray has noted, the sonnet “counteracts a feeling of dispossession by talking about dimensions, intimacies, knowledge of the place which dispossession cannot touch” (*Paperbark* 85), contextualising personal, environmental loss within the expanse of deep time.

Narratives of immersion and of obliteration of the self in nature, appearing as counter-colonial transgressions in postcolonial literature and as attempts at phenomenological representation in nature writing, are, like Murray’s sonnet, frequently located within the biologically and imaginatively abundant territory of the forest. In Western literature, the relation between humans and forests has occupied, like wider nature, a shifting ground between the symbiotic (relative) harmony of the pre-agrarian and pre-industrial eras, and the hierarchical exploitation that has characterised modernity. Yet enduringly, forests have been written as more symbolic of the wild and of the ancientness of the world, than almost any other landscape.

The forests of fairytales and folk-lore are places of liminality and transformation, sites of adventure, refuge and danger, inhabited by eccentric figures and talking animals. Sara Maitland has written of the alluring nature of the fairytale forest, and their enduring appeal as places “of primal innocence, where children could get away from the order of discipline and straight roads and good governance, and revert to their animal origins” (5). In this sense, forests embody the confluence of, and tension between, the human desire for wildness – for immersive escape from a structured human world - and the solace of transcendent temporality and natural order.

In “Forest,” the appearance of angels and devils in the narrative, its setting on the banks of the Tasmanian version of the river Styx, the mythical resonance of Joe’s creation of wings and the

ancient temperate rainforest itself, evoke an atmosphere of subterranean meaning. Implicit allusions to fairytales and mythical archetypes and sub-texts create a backdrop of continuity in a narrative concerned with the destruction of natural longevity and cohesion, in the form of aggressive deforestation.

Such notions of natural continuity, and the disintegration or, conversely, healing of the fragmented human-self through creativity and immersion in nature, are explored by Lopez's vivid and unsettling short story, "The Salmon." Lopez's narrative follows the actions of a man who becomes obsessed with the Canadian salmon's annual migration, in the face of isolation and personal crises.

[S]ome evenings he would write about the difficulties with his father, and things that had fallen apart in his life like a chrysalis flaking in the wind ... On other evenings he would write in a more orderly hand and at tremendous length, sometimes until dawn: on salmon, on the dependability of their migration for the sea, on the irrefutable evidence of it. In the years until now, during the worst times, he held this idea like a walnut in his fist, cherishing its permanence, its meaning. (*River Notes* 147)

In an attempt to honour the regularity and certainty of the salmon's journey, Lopez's protagonist creates a monument in mid-stream, in the form of a giant fish, sculpted from river-stones. The act of building the monument is comparable to the creative practises of several characters in *Maps for the Lost*, most notably, the making of the wings in "Forest." Lopez reveals the process as meditative and therapeutic, with its immersive physical dimension permeating boundaries between body and mind, mind and nature. The building of the sculpture creates room for contemplation (not of "the accidents of his life," but of "the turning of the earth" and "the sacred order to which the salmon coming upstream to spawn and die was central" (147)), and facilitates intimate knowledge of place and its natural materials. Yet in an early foreshadowing that nature may not be so easily interpreted or worshipped, and the subtly subversive dimension of the story, Lopez's narrator observes that the mysteries the man attempted to pry in his work, "remained as implacable as the faces of the stones" (147).

In "Forest," Joe pieces together the wings from the feathers he finds on the forest floor. While many of the feathers have been naturally discarded, others, drawn from the wings of dead birds or left behind in prematurely abandoned nests, are symbols of the fracturing that is occurring in the forests. For Joe, like Lopez's sculptor, the work is seen not only as a form of cohesive patterning, but as a source of potential dissolution or obliteration of the self: a surrendering to, and longing for, union with nature in response to grief – for Joe, a form of biophilic grief compounded by guilt, and for the sculptor, the personal losses he has experienced in his familial life. It is worth noting here, this relation between grief and creative assumption. It raises

questions about the myopic dimension of biophilic grief, and the possibility that it may distract an artist or theorist from the dynamics of the actual (natural) present, and fuel the kinds of well-intentioned creative folly that are explored in “Forest” and “The Salmon,” a question that we will return to later in the chapter. But while in “Forest” the eagles mock Joe’s attempts at union and veneration by first attacking and then ignoring him, in Lopez’s story, the salmon – only metres from the spawning pools which mark the culmination of their journey – abandon their ancient migration and turn around at the sight of the giant fish:

[o]verwhelmed with an understanding of the assumption of his act, made more grotesque by its perfection, he waded stupefied into the water where the fish manoeuvred, milling, trying to turn round. He staggered amongst them, trying to form a statement of apology, putting his fingers to their dark backs until they were gone, until he realised they were gone. (149)

For Lopez’s sculptor, the act of worshipping nature is significantly flawed, and his monument is revealed by the turning salmon as being mired in false perfection, creative arrogance and anthropomorphic assumption. The image creates a striking example of the difficulties that are inherent in evocations of nature, and the implications of its veneration, an act which, as Flanagan has noted, often serves to re-enforce the binaries it is attempting to subvert. While imaginative practice and creativity play vital roles in the breaking down of Cartesian divisions between our human selves and the non-human world, “The Salmon” illustrates the ways in which acts of naming, voicing, and celebrating the non-human must – in contrast to the solidity and perfection of Lopez’s stone fish – remain reflexively inchoate. “[T]he lines that divide us,” observes Anna Krein, “are as mysterious as the lines that connect” (8). There are boundaries that we can never dissolve, and things we cannot know.

### The Role of Writers

In her analysis of the way climate change has been both represented and elided by the novel form, Carolyn Kormann relates the insights of philosopher Slavoj Žižek. “When ... Žižek tried to describe our current condition,” she writes:

he offered an apocryphal battlefield anecdote. One soldier says to another, ‘Here, the situation is catastrophic but not serious.’ Žižek added, ‘Is this not more and more the way many of us, at least in the developed world, relate to our current global predicament? We all know about the impending catastrophe – ecological, social – but we somehow cannot take it seriously.’ Catastrophic but not serious: this is where we are, and fiction writers do not sit outside society. (“Melting”)

Žižek's anecdote evokes the tension between the tendency towards catastrophising in textual explorations of global warming, and the inadequacy of elision, between the prevalence of apocalyptic representation and the absence of any representation at all. In "A Call to Writers," Slovic and Moore identify multiple strategies and narrative forms through which writers may choose to interpret and navigate the climate crisis, including a laying out of reasons, indictment, apology, and a re-imagining of the world (6). Yet on the whole, a reliance upon apocalyptic narration prevails, prompted, in part, by a faith in the mobilising potential of apocalyptic tropes, by the nature of grief, and also, perhaps, by an impulse towards looking back to tradition in times of threat.

Garrard has observed that Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*, one of the seminal texts of ecocritical and environmental thought, was primarily informed by pastoral and apocalyptic tropes, "pre-existing ways of imagining the place of humans in nature that may be traced back to such sources as Genesis and Revelation" (2). The documenting of grief of place – the creation of elegies – plays a significant role in environmental literature, from Lopez's "Natural Grief," to the sacralising laments of McKibben's *The End of Nature*, the articulation of intense environmental affiliation, or biophilia, is frequently associated with expressions of loss. Yet the engagement of elegy as an environmental strategy is not without issue. The relation between elegy and ecology, Morton suggests, is problematic in that traditional Romantic elegy mourns the loss of a human or a human love, through the analogue of the environment. Through elegy in this sense, human sorrow is anthropomorphically echoed by the non-human world – mountains sigh and rivers weep – in a practice of pathetic fallacy which (where it is not recognised as an expression of reciprocity) is imbued with the appropriative tendencies of the human-centred Romantics. Morton takes this notion of implicit dualism further, arguing that true ecological thinking must entail an abandonment of both the rhetoric of disaster and the idea of a nature beyond ourselves, to which such disaster is predicted to befall. The science of ecology, he asserts, prohibits such rhetoric in the sense that everything, including humans, exists inside the ecological realm, and as such there is no possibility of the external cause or, (post-disaster) external assistance that the concept demands. "Ecological disasters are precisely not caused by the action of a beyond," he writes, "for in ecology, there is no beyond, no elsewhere, no 'yonder,' however remote" ("Disaster"). Morton's argument is positioned within current post-nature and post-human discourse, articulated in his *Ecology Without Nature*, which attempts to challenge the remnant dualism which he identifies in ecocritical writing, a dualism exemplified by the theory's frequent mobilisation of the apocalyptic and elegiac tropes of the Romantics.

Equally and perhaps more practically salient to the environmental elegies of today is the criticism that inherent within the act of environmental mourning is a fatalism that inhibits rather than inspires preventative action. “In ecological elegy,” writes Morton, “something strange happens to elegy’s usual organization of time. Ecological elegy asks us to mourn for something that has not completely passed, that perhaps has not even passed yet” (“Dark Ecology” 254). Elegiac practice, where the object of mourning remains, albeit in diminished form, entails a self-fulfilling prophesy, an act of pre-emption which often runs counter to environmental imperatives. It is a criticism that may be applied to McKibben’s *End of Nature*, in which the loss of an idealised, uncorrupted nature is presented as a *fait accompli*. In McKibben’s world, writes Garrard: “[t]he end is already behind us, leaving nothing more than various options for managing a nature rendered thoroughly and permanently domestic” (106). When the nature which was the “sounding board” for human mourning is lost, Morton explains, “[w]e have lost the objective correlative for loss itself, and have slipped away from mourning, which finds an appropriate way of symbolising loss, back into melancholia, which has no way of redressing woe. We have moved from the work of mourning to the work of sheer suffering” (“Dark Ecology” 253-55). Morton’s argument seems to rest upon the assumption that ecological elegy by definition mourns the loss of nature or ecology as a whole, rather than the loss of specific components or characteristics of nature. It is, in this sense, a problem of semantics, although as the issue of terminology is at the heart of Morton’s accusations, his criticisms are not so easily dismissed. In a similar vein, critiques of apocalypse have a tendency to focus on the totalising dimension of the term, dismissing the notion that this climate apocalypse may be experienced as incremental, an event that is in this sense already upon us, rather than confined to an imagined future. It is an ambiguity that appears common in climate change discourse, and the sense in which the term is used is often left unclear, adding to the interpretive confusion. For McKibben, a totalising vision of loss is written into the title of his book, and the loss of nature’s independence is described as “fatal to its meaning” (50), yet this fatalism is belied by the book’s call for urgent environmental action, and its conviction that there is something left that remains unequivocally worth protecting.

The only non-fiction piece in *Maps for the Lost*, “It will not be Enough,” is a form of elegy, and an apology to my daughter, who will inherit the consequences of my generation’s inaction. The conclusion to the narrative, and the collection: “I will write the world for you, as it is now, as it was...” (111) is a pledge to attempt to give imaginative shape or voice to what may be lost. In a sense, all the stories enact this, are elegiac to a degree because of the always-present knowledge that the ecosystems, species, places, ways of life, and things of beauty they interpret are threatened. Perhaps elegy is neither a sufficient nor appropriate term to describe the relating of



ongoing and cumulative grief of place, a grief in which extinction follows extinction, and the losses stretch forward as far as they stretch back.

Jennifer Mills argues the importance of bearing witness during an era of mass extinction, when the act of writing can seem futile, and “the knowledge of climate change and environmental catastrophe can overwhelm all else, including the creative impulse.” “As the planet warms,” she writes, “we’re struck with a sort of Noah’s Ark dilemma. We’re haggling over what belongs on the ark and what does not, not just in terms of what we save, but in terms of what we bother to imagine” (“The Lost”). Whether this position is open to accusations of fatalism or passivity, is debatable. As in the case of environmental elegy, however, the incremental losses are real, and their disclosure surely presents itself as a political as well as artistic act. The practice of bearing witness offers insight and revelation; imaginative possibilities which, in the case of extinction, may soon be irretrievably consigned to the past. As Clark has observed, we can never objectively know what the snow leopard thinks, what the thylacine knew, but it is surely our creative responsibility to guess.

Rigby has written of the role of the “ecoprophetic witness” in the literature of the Anthropocene. Such writing, she suggests, would imagine possible futures, whilst revealing the nature of the status quo, seeking “to disclose the catastrophic consequences of continuing on our current ecocidal path,” and directing us towards alternatives (“Idle”). It is a mode of writing which, for Rigby, must by necessity engage with both apocalypse and grief, inciting fear as well as “lamentation in order to engender transformation” (“Idle”). Articulating the challenge before ecocritical writing, and the literary community as a whole, that “in the face of the unspeakable horror of an unfolding ecocide, all our fine words might amount to ‘idle chatter,’” Rigby calls for a writing that does not shy away from the hazards of prediction, apocalypse or mourning (“Idle”). Citing the words of Franz Kafka, “[a] book must be the ax for the frozen sea within us,” she argues that it is “precisely such biting, stinging words” that our dire environmental predicament demands (“Idle”). Despite the difficulties attached to such forms of writing, and the erudite criticism of scholars such as Morton, grief, horror, anger remain legitimate responses to current crises, and as such their role in environmental writing that aspires to social transformation is clear. It is arguably the lack of this emotional response that has contributed to a level of detachment within climate change discourse. In scientific fields, a similar challenge is presented to biologists and climatologists whose warnings are going unheeded, and many scientists are now asking how their personal sense of urgency and concern can be successfully communicated to the public.

Where Flanagan searches for words on the “shallow reefs” of a landscape he knows intimately, other writers are rendered speechless by the changes before them, and by the potential scale of the loss. Smith suggests that this silence is in part a response to the inevitable trivialising of small, identifiable losses in the face of impending disaster, and is again due to a failure of language. “There is the scientific and ideological language for what is happening to the weather,” she writes, “but there are hardly any intimate words” (“Elegy”). If our emotional response to climate change was given greater discursive weight, Smith maintains, “the whole landscape of the debate would be different” (“Elegy”). To a degree this deficit is connected to the issue of scale that was identified by Clark, who observes the way environmental slogans have a tendency to “follow horrifying predictions of climate chaos with injunctions, no less solemn, not to overfill the kettle” (*Cambridge* 136). This kind of language, he argues “enacts a bizarre derangement of scales, collapsing the trivial and the catastrophic into each other” (*Cambridge* 136). The juxtaposition of apocalyptic language along-side the minutiae of individual responses, and similarly, local ecological losses (the extinction of a species of moth, the erosion of a coastline) at once privileges the (distant) apocalyptic over the (present) local, and diminishes the impact of both.

Smith goes so far as claiming that as well as creating a diversion, placing emphasis on the (very real) likelihood of apocalyptic scenarios fosters guilt and horror over useful action, perpetuating an historical, religiously based pattern of “shame, denial, and self flagellation” (“Elegy”) that is embedded in Western culture. “The terrible truth,” she writes, “is that we [have] a profound, historical attraction to apocalypse. In the end, the only thing that [can] create the necessary traction in our minds [is] the intimate loss of the things we love” (“Elegy”). While in fiction, even the apocalyptic aspects of climate change remain under-imagined, the privileging of the future over the incremental and undeniable changes occurring in the present may have the effect of distancing us from the problem, the grief that is so inextricably attached, and the considerable task at hand.

Robert MacFarlane’s article, “The Burning Question,” addresses the difficulties that are inherent in language’s ability to relate the nature and effects, both personal and environmental, of the changing climate. MacFarlane describes the changes in the permafrost landscape of Canada’s Banks Island, changes which the indigenous Inuvialuit language is struggling to express. “The Inuvialuit culture,” he writes, “is unprepared for these rapid fluxes. Old words (the name of an inland lake) are now unaccompanied by their phenomena; new phenomena (a fork of flame in a previously lightningless sky) are unaccompanied by words” (“Burning”). The consequences of climate change, MacFarlane observes, “are now perceptible in language as well as degrees Celcius” (“Burning”). At the same time as atmospheric change is consigning

ancient words to obsolescence, and demanding new words to describe newly initiated phenomena, language is undergoing a new process of abstraction. It is a contemporary abstraction, fuelled by the intensifying role of information technology in our modern lives, and seemingly at odds with the ecocritical project of re-orienting language back to the earth. In *LandMarks*, MacFarlane relates the example of the removal of words concerned with nature from a recent edition of the *Oxford Junior Dictionary*. “[C]ygnets, dandelion, fern” were replaced by “bullet-point, celebrity, chatroom,” he writes, in order “to reflect the consensus experience of modern-day childhood” (3). What the example reveals, other than a pragmatic, arguably realistic interpretation of contemporary Western, urban childhoods, is an “alarming acceptance” that nature is “unproblematically disposable” and so readily separable from everyday language (3).

The language of the Anthropocene is undergoing multiple processes of enforced and self-directed transformation. The abstraction of the modern idiom differs from post-Enlightenment abstraction in that its political imperatives and implications are less clear. The elasticity of the contemporary lexicon is illustrated by the seemingly biophilial co-option of words from nature such as “twitter” and “blackberry” into the profoundly anthropogenic landscape of information technology. Yet as MacFarlane points out, the natural roots of words are never far beneath the surface, and etymological examination frequently illuminates the “originary role of nature in language” (*Landmarks* 6). Relating Ralph Waldo Emerson’s project of restoring the poetic origin of apparently abstracted words, MacFarlane explains that when: “[c]onsidering the verb *to consider*, he [Emerson] reminds us that it comes from the Latin *con-siderare*, and thus carries a meaning of ‘to study or see with the stars’ ... a mundane verb is suddenly starlit” (*Landmarks* 6).

In the complex and rapidly mutating culture of the twenty-first century, in which the changing climate will likely take an increasingly directive role, we need writing which, as Murray has put it, operates at “full stretch” (*Persistence* 93) calling upon and re-centring a broad range of strategies in order to reflect contemporary experience, without eliding or appropriating the more-than-human world of which it is fundamentally a part. This imperative does not deny the role of more traditional discursive approaches – the disproportionate lack of climate change literature, while diminishing, is still demonstrably real, and extends to all forms and disciplines of writing – but the absence itself illustrates the inadequacy of conventional modes of literature to fully address the changes that are occurring around us. James Bradley has described the limitations of the realist novel in climate change fiction, noting the form’s innate constraints of scale and time, and its ineffective “imposition of order upon what is an open-ended and diffuse problem” (“Fiction”). The realist novel’s conventions of linearity, character-based focus and

intrinsic anthropocentrism, leave it ill-equipped to articulate a topic which, in the words of Clark, “may involve time-frames far-exceeding a single human life, which may deal with spatial scales of the very large or very small, or with issues that do not fit traditional political polarities of left or right” (*Cambridge* 5). While Adam Trexler’s recent study identified over two hundred novels about global warming published in the last thirty years, and argues that to a degree, the emergence of the genre has been overlooked by critics and the literary community as a whole, the majority of these novels are genre-based rather than literary fiction (205). Although there are exceptions, where literary novels have attempted to tackle climate change, Trexler observes, “the evasions and transformations they find it necessary to perform” tend to produce apolitical, didactic and often critically derided narratives (206). Novels such as Kingsolver’s *Flight Behaviour* and Bradley’s recently released, multi-generational novel *Clade*, however, (both of which, not incidentally, are informed by scientific frameworks) make the capabilities of nominally conventional narrative clear, and underline the urgent need for, and role of, human stories in climate change discourse, as well as the non-human stories that are primarily called for by this essay. Despite such exceptions, however, Clark predicts that the nature of the climate-change era will increasingly render attempts at realist representation redundant, inspiring instead the kinds of innovative transgressions and qualities of *adequation*, to which ecocritical discourse already aspires. “The main artistic implication of trying to represent the Anthropocene,” he writes:

must be a deep suspicion of any traditionally realist aesthetic. With its bizarre kinds of action-at-a-distance, its imponderable scale, the collapse of distinctions between the trivial and the disastrous, nature and culture, and the proliferation of forces that cannot be directly perceived, the Anthropocene becomes deeply counter-intuitive. It may find its analogue in modes of the fantastic, new forms of magic realism or science fiction, or texts in which distinctions between “character” and “environment” become fragile or break down, or in which the thoughts and desires of an individual are not intelligible in themselves but only as the epiphenomenal sign of entrapment in some larger and not necessarily benign dynamic. (“Nature” 81)

It is with these thoughts in mind, that I turn to Indigenous Australian writer Alexis Wright’s novel, *The Swan Book*.

### *The Swan Book*

In his essay “Lightness,” Italo Calvino described the interplay in literary representation between the polarities of lightness and weight, between a kind of poetic atomism and the “inertia” and “opacity” of language confined to realism (4). The desire for lightness does not reject the place

of weight, Calvino argued, but rather, it counter-balances it. “[T]he idea of the world as composed of weightless atoms” Calvino observed:

is striking just because we know the weight of things so well. So, too, we would be unable to appreciate the lightness of language if we could not appreciate language that has some weight to it. We might say that throughout the centuries, two opposite tendencies have competed in literature: one tries to make language into a weightless element that hovers above things like a cloud or better, perhaps, the finest dust or, better still, a field of magnetic impulses. The other tries to give language the weight, density, and concreteness of things, bodies and sensations. (15)

What Calvino gestures towards is a re-imagining of the universe that is not shackled to the weight of dualistic knowledge, or constrained by the ordered linearity of conventional literary realism. “Lightness,” like his wider body of work, envisions a more interdisciplinary version of writing, a “mélange of literature, science and philosophy” (Pilz xi) that is inspired by the dynamics of contemporary science, and which aspires to an epistemological shift away from humanistic binaries towards a re-positioning of humanity “within the broader cosmos” (Pilz xv).

Wright’s futuristic novel *The Swan Book* explores the nature of lightness through the lens of an indigenous ontology. In so doing, it illuminates the transformative power of the literary imagination, its ability to reveal the elusive, multi-dimensional quality of nature and the (natural) human mind, to dissolve a world that has turned into stone (4). Within the hallucinatory, poly-vocal narrative, Wright weaves the story of the flocks of black swans whose migration patterns have been disrupted by the rapidly changing climate, Oblivia, a silent Aboriginal child found hiding among the roots of an ancient eucalypt after surviving the trauma of rape, Bella Donna of the Champions, the climate change refugee who raises the orphaned Oblivia inside a web of displaced stories, and the wreck-strewn, post-apocalyptic swamplands where they live. Wright distils Calvino’s lightness into the gliding bodies of the swans who appear without precedent in the dusty northern skies, stiling “the heat of the day with song where there was no song for swans” (Wright, *Swan* 14). Within a narrative characterised by chaos, dislocation and confinement, the swans at once embody graceful beauty – a quality which resonates within the imaginative consciousness of both the southern and northern hemispheres – and the anxiety that is inherent in their signification of the disruption of natural order. “[T]he swan looked like a paragon of anxious premonitions,” Wright’s narrator observes when the first swan appears before the inhabitants of the swamp, “rather than the arrival of a miracle for saving the world” (*Swan* 14).

Despite, and because of their lightness, the swans are encoded with cultural weight, and with them come stories: the poetry, mythology and literature of the north, narratives given voice by

the stateless Bella Donna, which travel virus-like, “gypsy-like across the planet in the way of migratory birds, taking hold of minds in places they don’t belong” (Gleeson-White). The presence of the swans imbues the novel, like the land it invokes, with a syncretic intertextuality, and the notion of country as a storied landscape which is so central to indigenous philosophy, is pushed to extremes by a narrative exposing the importance of belonging, and the consequences of dislocation. The relation between language and land in *The Swan Book* is one of profound symbiosis. Stories arise from and are inscribed into the landscape; the words themselves hold an almost physical dimension: “[y]ou could almost reach out and grab each word with your hand” (54) while of the swans, Wright writes, “the girl ... thought she might read their fortunes in the language nature had written in the blackish-grey-tipped curled tail feathers scalloped across their backs” (71). Wright’s land is audible, vocal: “It was the land screaming with all of its life to the swans, *Welcome to Our World*” (327), and though dialogue switches with disorientating speed between humans, animals, objects and texts, the narrative is built upon the indigenous knowledge that stories, like language, arise from place, and are in this sense innately located. When Bella Donna arrives in the swamp, she brings with her the words and stories of a distant, foreign landscape, and for the Aboriginal locals, though they acknowledge her English as “[v]ery good English for sure,” it is not the language of Country, and is thus understood to be useless: perfect “for chatting a long way away, in its homeland,” “but not here” (*Swan* 23).

Wright’s shifting syntax and multi-layered narrative, borrowing from French, Latin and Aboriginal languages, “a spinning multi-stranded helix of stories” (Wright, “Carpentaria” 6) which cross time and distance with the dexterity of her prose, overlays a landscape from which the oral tales once grew across millennia; stories which, as the novel foreshadows, are essential to the survival of the land and of its people. “[T]his earth must be sung, danced, told,” writes Jane Gleeson-White:

Without its stories this Country will die. In the same way, *The Swan Book* seems to suggest, perhaps this planet will die when stories, and the people and creatures who perform them, are uprooted from their place, lose their connection with it. Unless a new story can be found, we are in danger of severing our relationship with the planet for all time, losing our voice for it, leaving only the birds [in the words of Wright] ‘swearing at the grass in throwback words of the traditional language for the country that was no longer spoken by any living human being on the Earth.’ (“Viral”)

Joni Adamson observes that in many indigenous traditions, stories of the speaking, animate land are not confined to the category of myth, but are understood as continuing “authoritative commentary,” as sources of deep knowledge concerning the contemporary as well as ancient worlds (173). “These stories offer those who possess them,” she writes,

‘a complex navigational system’ or ‘seeing instrument’ for understanding human relation to the stars, animals, soils, and planting cycles; they allow humans to ‘see’ spans of history unavailable in a single lifetime and thus offer them access to scales of time necessary to understanding environmental change at planetary levels. (173)

Although the swans are inflected with stories arising from all over the globe, their presence in the swamp reveals not only the unsettlement of the migration patterns of the birds themselves, but the disruption of an ancient, indigenous narrative that comprehends, nurtures and is sustained by the land through the telling of its stories. Despite the fact that the swans had not been seen in the northern landscape in living memory, “the swamp people thought that the swans had returned to a home of ancient times, by following stories for country that had been always known to them. Swans had law too. But now, the trouble was, nobody in the North remembered the stories in the oldest Law scriptures of these big wetland birds” (Wright, *Swan* 67). Indigenous knowledge of the climate is ancient, and their concept of temporality, as previously discussed, differs from Western understanding. It is a culture that has seen vast natural changes in both the land and the climate, and it recognises ecological patterns that, to unaccustomed eyes, can easily remain invisible, or appear magical. The novel seems to suggest that even amidst the fracturing of an anthropogenically altered climate, and the severance of traditional systems of knowledge, the natural world retains traces of song-lines, or maps, where humans do not. There is a lingering, fragile coherence in Wright’s dystopian nature, but its human correlate, and means of interpretation, have been lost through cultural dispossession. Wright leaves the question open, and it is possible the swamp people’s belief that the swans have returned to ancient habitats is solely an expression of cultural loss, rather than a glimpse of some forgotten truth, but it hints at a more optimistic perspective than is frequently found in the post-apocalyptic fictions of the West, informed by a different ontology of nature, and our human place within it.

One of the *The Swan Book*’s significant achievements is its ability to parabolise the experience of indigenous Australian dispossession and apply it to a futuristic and global context, in order for readers, as Jessica White explains, to “understand what pollution will do to one’s mind, environment and home” (“Fluid”). Geordie Williamson has observed the way Wright’s novel departs from the narrative conventions of post-apocalyptic fiction in its abundant portrayal of *life*. In contrast to dystopian novels such as Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road*, in which the apocalypse is characterised by emptiness, a thinning out of human and animal life, *The Swan Book* is “a veritable ark of collective nouns: [where] plagues of rats, parliaments of owls, flights of butterflies and clouds of locusts all battle for descriptive attention” (“Intervention”). To a significant extent, the novel’s protean narrative reflects Wright’s extension of sympathy to the non-human world and subsequent attention to its plurality of voice, yet it also recognises the

invasive, colonising nature of the indigenous experience of apocalypse – an experience that is located in the past and in the present, as well as an imagined future, and which is characterised as much by *presence* as it is by absence.

*The Swan Book* explores both the colonial dimension of the climate crisis and the polluting, colonising role of dislocated stories – the imaginative constructs of dualistic, imperial thought – and the relation that exists between them. Bella Donna’s northern stories, themselves encoded with the “heritage of wandering” (Gleeson-White) that informs the literature of the West, attach themselves and are fed to the migrating birds, and the land itself, just as they infiltrate the minds of the human inhabitants of the swamp. “In the muddy waters” writes Wright, “the old woman went on feeding squads of cygnets volumes of a tangled, twisted love story about the Gods only knew what, which they soaked up like pieces of wet bread” (*Swans* 71). The novel illuminates the deep ecological connectedness between place, narrative, body and mind, replacing dualistic binaries with an intricate diversity, a diversity which recognises both the reciprocity and sovereignty of inter-connected life. At the same time, the novel highlights the political dimension of the stories that we tell ourselves, and are told, and their connection to pollution on a planetary scale.

Wright’s description of Oblivia’s hiatus among the roots of a sacred tree is subliminal and dream-like, shifting across boundaries of language and time, yet all the while retaining the visceral, located physicality of the speaking land:

Locked in the world of sleep, only the little girls fingers were constantly moving, in slow swirls like music. She was writing stanzas in ancient symbols wherever she could touch – on the palms of her hands, and all over the tree root’s dust-covered surfaces. Whatever she was writing, dredged from the soup of primordial memory in these ancient lands, it was either the oldest language coming to birth again instinctively, or ... the fingers of the unconscious child forming words that resembled the twittering of bird song speaking about the daylight: but the little girl could not understand the old ghost language of warbling and chortling remembered by the ancient river gum. (8)

*The Swan Book*, like Wright’s earlier work, evokes a storied landscape of such intricate multiplicity and temporality that her style is frequently labelled magic realist, a classification which, as Frances Devlin-Glass has observed, is inflected with “unconsciously colonialist” (394) biases. In this sense, consigning Wright’s work to the genre serves to trivialise the indigenous sacred by reducing it to the status of magic, a practice harking back to antiquated Primitivist assumptions concerning the nature of indigenous beliefs (Devlin-Glass 394). The label’s unqualified application to texts such as Wright’s, fails to recognise both the difficulties



entailed in translating an indigenous consciousness into the terms of the Western literary imagination, and the complexities of the land Wright attempts to represent.

In their discussion of Wright's novel, *Carpenteria*, citing Stephen Slemon, Huggan and Tiffin argue that the application of the term discloses the political dimension of Wright's work, in the sense that magic realism can be seen to be a literary practice "'closely linked with a perception of living on the margins'" (84), itself encoded with resistance of dualistic systems. Yet in its yoking of the magical (or in this instance, *sacred*) and scientific, the genre highlights the multi-dimensional aspect of indigenous notions of Country, a quality which transcends their inherent political symbolism. "In Wright's magic realism," Devlin-Glass explains, "the sacred is not a 'counterweight to empiricism' (Faris 68) but ultimately an effect of sustained observation of natural phenomena" (394). In this way, Wright's work "draws attention to the relationship between mythology and deep ecological knowledge," evoking a landscape in which "Indigenous dreaming is a narrative formation of those understandings and relationships," and ecology and story are seen as different incarnations or transcriptions of a greater whole (Devlin-Glass 394). Indigenous scholar Jeanine Leane, writes Gleeson-White, "has found the perfect generic term for the complex reality Wright's fiction represents. She calls it 'Aboriginal Realism'" ("Viral"). It is a form of 'realism' which arguably, from an ecocritical perspective, appears better equipped to represent the multi-dimensional, inter-connected and political nature of the more-than-human world, than any that has been produced by the Western literary imagination to date.

What Wright's fiction does, in its disregard for convention, in its linguistic and thematic hybridity and transgression of temporal, textual and dialogical boundaries, is begin to imagine a new indigenous cosmology: a map of Country, and of Earth, as it *is* and as it could become. The novel engages in a new form of imagining, a creative synthesis that is informed at once by an ancient and profoundly located indigenous philosophy and experience, and the fractured multiplicity and homogenisation of a postmodern (and conceivably post-apocalyptic) global reality. Like the myna birds of its epilogue, "the little linguists with yellow beaks" who scavenge through the remains of the swamp after the last of the swans have gone, piecing together new stories from lost languages and fragmented, forgotten things, Wright's novel creates "glimpses of a new internationally dimensional language about global warming and changing climates for this land," its teeming, tangled voices evoking the world as it is, and the world gone mad. It behoves us, as writers, to "listen hard" (Wright, *Swan* 329).

## Conclusion

In the face of the climate crisis, the need for a discursive engagement with the true, dynamic nature of the land, and the textual disclosure of the myriad relationships we have with it, has assumed a unique urgency. We are at an historic moment in which, in all fields of knowledge, the imperative to include and respond adequately to the non-human natural world and the implications of environmental threats, has never been greater. The transgressive dimension of climate change, however, and the nature of pollution on a planetary scale, have rendered the methods by which literary scholarship and writing have traditionally ordered and represented nature, largely ineffective.

What this essay has argued is that the relation between the elision of nature in the cultural production of meaning, and the disproportionate silence which has defined the cultural response to the climate crisis to date, is circular. It is only through a more thorough comprehension of, and engagement with, the more-than-human world that we can begin to apprehend the true implications of the changing climate. Similarly, a more thorough comprehension of the crisis itself may illuminate exactly what it is that is being threatened, disrupted, or brought to an end.

In “Nature and Silence,” Manes recounts Max Oelshlaeger’s thoughts on the degree to which Western language and culture have drifted away from the natural world, a transition culminating in the conceptual extremes of postmodern abstraction. ‘The language we speak today,’ Manes observes:

the idiom of Renaissance and Enlightenment humanism, veils the processes of nature with its own cultural obsessions, directionalities and motifs that have no analogue in the natural world. As Max Oelschlaeger puts it, ‘It is as if we had compressed the entire buzzing, howling, gurgling biosphere into the narrow vocabulary of epistemology, to the point that someone like Georg Lukács could say, “nature is a societal category” – and actually be understood.’ (339)

The land is vocal, protean and alive. A responsive textual engagement with nature is dependent upon an acknowledgement of this vitality through forms of reflexive dialogical translation, practices which invoke the speaking landscapes of indigenous and animistic traditions. Such writing entails a re-envisioning of conceptual boundaries between humans and the more-than-

human world, an apprehension of both their integrity and shifting permeability, and a recognition of the ways in which they are determined or altered by environmental threats.

I have focussed upon Wright's *The Swan Book* and Murray's "Presence" not for comparison with my own fiction, but because of our shared philosophical motivations, and because of the ways in which both works *enact* the practices of the ecological imagination that are called for by this essay. The stories of *Maps for the Lost* admittedly function in a far quieter way than the work of Murray or Wright, but what is most significant about them, what defines their position in contemporary writing about nature and place, is their lyrical correspondence with non-human nature, and their articulation of a series of images and ideas about the way we humans live as part of that nature. The world I have tried to evoke in my fiction is one of fluidity and interconnection, where notions of isolation are only the tricks or failures of human perception. In "Seeds," the garden of the old woman is, like her own consciousness, even in its period of quiescence engaged in processes of transformation and movement: old life-forms are fossilised, buried seeds and bulbs respond to diurnal rhythms and fluctuations in the soil. "Everything in a landscape," Tredinnick has noted:

is in motion, fast or slow; and everything is engaged in relationships. Nature is never still; and what we see is vibrantly filled with what we cannot see – atoms, geological movements, winds, seasons, sap, salt, microbes, thoughts of animals, rotations of leaves. Places are alive with movement and complexity. (127)

The trajectories of human / non-human relationships, and their points of convergence, are both visible, like the passage of the tide across a beach inscribed with text, and invisible, like the diffusion of molecules of scent into a home; their possible incarnations infinitely complex.

What I hope to have revealed in both the fictional and theoretical components of this project is the correlation between imaginative and ecological processes, and the ways in which nurturing such a correspondence can maintain the permeability of human / non-human delineation, and in so doing, further human negotiations of more-than-human place. For ecocritical and environmental writers, such a correspondence can be sustained, in part, by a more thorough comprehension of scientific knowledge. The science of nature can direct us to places that the Western imagination has struggled to go, and in this sense, where it is combined with a practice of immersive reciprocity, its engagement can facilitate a deeper understanding of the land and our human place within it. In terms of scholarship, despite the relative newness of interdisciplinary relationships of this kind, they are not a radical proposition but rather a project of restoration, one of many paths by which writing can begin to return itself to the natural world, and redress the division which has developed over time. As Louise Westling observes, ecocriticism "necessarily turns toward the life sciences to restore literary culture to the fabric of

the biological being from which it has emerged and within which it will always be enveloped” (2).

The ecological imagination practises, in the manner of archaeology and the science by which it is informed, a reflexive synthesis of atomism and holism, of elements of postmodern fragmentation and ecocritical continuity. Where both the land and the creative artefact are understood as relational, vocal and dynamic, the frequency of human / non-human connections, and their inherent tensions and possibilities becomes apparent. Lopez has written of the ancient, communicative and healing power of the imagination, and its ability to evoke the set of relationships we understand as place. The truth “is something alive and unpronounceable,” he writes, “[s]tory creates an atmosphere in which it is discernible as a pattern” (*Crossing* 69). What creative patterning can realise, in pluralistic, open-ended forms of language, mapping, and story, is the kind of shifting coherence that is present in the landscape, a way of ordering the world without pinning it down, thus implying or tapping into sources of continuity, while avoiding the reductive tendencies of hegemonic meta-narratives. Story, in this sense, is a form of artesian creativity, responding to patterns, voices and ideas that traditional discourse commonly elides.

Climate Change is incremental, it is ineluctable, and it demands a kind of comprehension of time and of the future that has not been required of any preceding generation. It is still difficult to categorically attribute specific catastrophic weather events to global warming, and as such, the climate apocalypse remains conveniently cast into the future. Yet it is ever present, and even its absence casts a shadow over our literature and our culture. This “crisis at the centre of our collective life,” writes Benjamin Kunkel, “exists for us at the margins of individual consciousness, as a whisper of dread or a rustle of personal implication. The main event of contemporary civilisation is never, on any given day, the main event” (“Inventing”). The inadequacy of our response – both culturally and politically – can be read, in part, as a failure of the imagination: a failure to grasp the proximity of the threat that lies before us, to notice the changes, and to heed the warnings of others who do. It is a failure that fundamentally reflects our inability to understand the land as dynamic, responsive, inclusive of us, and agential in the sense that it can so comprehensively influence our human lives and futures. What climate change will assuredly do is shine a light on the intricate mesh of natural systems and ecotones it disrupts, and we can only hope that this will inspire a greater knowledge and awareness of the

world we inhabit, and the determining role we play in its future, before further, irreversible damage is done.

While this essay has identified multiple textual strategies and tropes through which the climate crisis has been and will continue to be represented, and has acknowledged the need for their continued interrogation, the gravest threat is still silence: the disproportionate level of direct representation that has characterised cultural discourse to date. The most important task of writers today is to end this silence, to orient our work towards the articulation and questioning of this moral, environmental crisis, until, as Slovic has put it, “we can collectively sway our societies toward a more sustainable direction ... or at least witness and apologize and indict and broken-heartedly celebrate the ‘new world’ ... we have created” (2-3).

In his speech launching artist Richard Wastell’s exhibition, “We are Making a New World,” a suite of paintings depicting the after-math of the practises of industrial forestry, the clear-fell sites of Tasmania’s ancient forests, Flanagan describes the nature of the environmental and human loss that such acts of destruction reveal and foreshadow:

The great forests are gone, and they will not return, and nor will the intense human response we had to such places. Everything hereafter will be ordered and imaginable, paintable and representable in a way that those wild places never were, and we will be less. (“Love”)

While this essay calls for a reinvigorated textual correspondence with non-human nature, it does so in the knowledge of the asymptotical essence of the negotiation, and the ultimately un-nameable quality of the land. What such a correspondence entails is a synthesis of immersion and reflection, a reflexive abandoning of artistic ego, of hubris, and an acceptance of the integrity and mystery of the land, combined with an attempt to understand it. Rather than hindering the art of representation, it is in this very tension, between the desire to re-imagine a world that has traditionally been appropriated, subjugated or ignored, and the impossibility of definition, that the ecological consciousness can find its most fertile imaginative source.

The truth, as Lopez has discerned, is “unpronounceable” (*Crossing* 69), and one of the gravest aspects of global climate change, and the loss of diversity, fracturing of ecosystems and homogenisation that define it, is that it may begin to erode this integrity. Although nature will not end, some elusive dimension of the nature we have known, of the genius of evolutionary interconnection, may be lost. If we fail to engage with complexity, diversity and contingency

we will lose it, and our ‘buzzing, howling, gurgling biosphere’ (Oelschlaeger, “Language” 274) will become the Enlightenment’s *tabula rasa*. As Krien observes, when relating Wilson’s predictions for the future of the biosphere, if the current rate of warming, extinction and habitat depletion continue, the Anthropocene epoch may retrospectively be categorised as the sixth extinction, comparable only to a handful of events in the Earth’s four billion year history.

“[T]his cannot be proven for certain,” writes Krien:

at least not until it is well and truly upon us, a risk that many seem willing to take. But perhaps more poignant is biologist Edward O’Wilson’s description of the period that will follow. Wilson says it will be “the Age of Loneliness” – a planet with us and not much else. In his writing there is no apocalypse, no doom, no gates of hell, no wrath of god, or mass hysteria – there is only sadness. (8)

It is more than human creativity and thought that will be diminished by such loss.



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