A Long Walk Through A Short History

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That old cowdungpossum smell! It hit me as soon as I stepped out of the car. Proust was right, nothing triggers memory like smell. Only I wasn't smelling Madeleine cake; I was sniffing familiar country air.

Billy Drahaam eased himself out of the driver's seat, stretched his tall flabby frame and yawned. We stood, he on one side of the car, me on the other, breathing in the surprisingly cool air. After the humidity of the city we'd left only an hour ago it felt good to be there.

"Pretty, isn't it." Billy Drahaam mused, gazing out over the countryside.

Such a sentiment, coming from him, surprised me. Billy Drahaam wasn't exactly the sensitive type. But he was right; the old School of Arts hall, with its backdrop of green countryside and blue hills, was pretty in a picture-post-card kind of way. The only other buildings in sight were some farm sheds in the nearby paddocks and a distant farmhouse on a distant hill, its red roof blatant against the blue sky.

I turned and walked up the track that led past the hall towards the remains of what was once Closeburn Station, Billy Drahaam followed in his easy gait, a look of bemusement on his still-boyish face.

"Never thought I'd be back here," Billy Drahaam said, standing at the edge of what had been the old platform. "Not much left is there?"

It had never been much of a station, more a siding really. There'd been a wooden waiting shed with a windowed ticket office, a goods shed that once held milk cans and, down the far end of the platform, a toilet block. All gone. Leaving a pervading sense of emptiness.

The last time I'd stood here was back in July 1955, when we'd come with the First Kalinga scouts for a camp on Cedar Creek. I remember getting on the train at Central Station, my parents on the platform waving, father smiling a strange smile, mother crying, kids all waving to parents as the train pulled out. Once we

were out of sight, Billy Drahaam turning to me and said, ‘you’d think we were going off to war’, which was pretty smart coming from him.

I’m staring out the window, silently mouthing the names of passing stations - Windsor, Newmarket, Wilston - before drifting off to the rhythm of the train, waking with a start to a roaring sound and total darkness, the smell of coal smoke and taste of coal grit everywhere, Billy Drahaam saying ‘take it easy Will it’s only a bloody tunnel’ and we’re steaming out of the darkness into the bright light of open countryside with not a house in sight, as if we’d come through some sort of portal into a different world and the train whistle’s blowing and we’re steamed into Closeburn Station, engine panting like some overworked beast, doors flung open, boys frantically scrambling about for their things and I’m on the platform blinking up into the late afternoon sky, involuntarily shivering with the fresh coolness of the country air, the train whistle blowing, steam drifting up, driving wheels spinning against the grade and the train pulling away, sending clouds of black coal smoke drifting skywards.

Leaving a vacuum that pressed on my ears.

Beyond the shrill calls of excited boys all crumpled khaki shirts and shorts with sock down around their ankles and scarfs awry and shoes already dirty, beyond all that fuss and bother I hear a bird call loud and clear out of the sky and I gaze up in wonder at that magic bird of the high places, oblivious for the moment to the bustle around me, watching the Currawong wing its way across the sky. It’s the first time I’ve seen a Currawong and from that moment on I always see them as birds of the high and open country with their black feathers and far-away calls.

And as I stood at the edge of that platform recalling that long-ago moment and how it had affected me the same call came clear and pure out of the sky. It had seemed a lonely call back then. It still seemed a lonely call.

I looked down to where the rails used to be the line, followed with my eyes the line of the overgrown embankment that once carried the narrow gauge rails through the verdant foothills of the Samford Valley on the long slow climb to Dayboro. Billy Drahaam stood beside me.

“Not much left is there”, he said.

It was past midday, the sun beginning its slow descent westward. In a few hours it would sink behind the wooded ramparts of the main range, casting long cool shadows over the valley. A sudden chill ran up my spine, causing goosebumps and an odd sense of foreboding!

We walked away from the station, stood at the rusted front gate looking over the weedy yard at the old hall. It looks much the same as had back in 1955; a typically Queensland country hall perched high on wooden stumps in the middle of a weedy yard, its hardwood weatherboards painted mission brown, a set of stairs leading up to a veranda half enclosed with wooden palings, paint peeling, windows broken, creosoted black stumps at awkward angles, rotting staircase missing steps. An old poster, flapping from the front wall beside the entrance, advertised a dance long past.

'That old building could tell a few stories," said Billy Drahaam.

I imagined country weddings, bride and groom all dressed up, drunken guests spewing over the veranda rails; country dances leading to courtships and late night trysts in the back yard behind the rainwater tank resulting in unexpected additions to the local population. I wondered about the people who built the hall back in the nineteen twenties: local farming people who raised enough money to build it. In the days when there was a community large enough to warrant a railway siding.

Bill wandered off through the gate and round the back to take a piss. I took off my backpack and sat down on the pack's fold out seat, dragged out my journal and began to sketch the hall. So immersed was I in the drawing that I didn't hear the horse until it is upon me. It gives a horsy snort, causing me to start. I looked up to find the thing standing right beside me. Seated the horse was a young woman in full equestrian gear.

"Hello," the young woman offers, looked down at me from what seemed a great height.

She had that haughty 'dressage' look and spoke in what I took to be a private girl's school accent.

"Nice horse," I said.

"Tony," she said, patting the horse's neck.

The horse whinnied, shook its magnificent mane, stared straight ahead as if I didn't exist.

"Tony was Tom Mix's horse," I offered.

"Who's Tom Mix,' she replied.

"Just a bloke with a horse."

"Pretty good," she said after a pause, indicating my sketch of the hall.

I thanked her, said it was nothing; just a reminder.

"Of what," she asked.

"Of the past," I said.

She sat on the horse as if in deep thought (which she probably wasn't). I put aside the journal and stood. I patted the horse, asked the woman if she was local. She said she was, that she lived 'over there', indicating with her elegant hand, a place beyond the station. I turned but could see no buildings.

She laughed, said that they are a bit hidden, that her parents liked it that way. "Don't get strangers coming round knocking at the door. House is down the line a bit, towards the old railway tunnel. Mum grows mushrooms in there. They like the dark."

That bloody tunnel!

"That your taxi?" she asked, indicating Billy Drahaam's car.

I told her it belonged to my friend, who brought me here.

The taxi was Bill's livelihood. He had several, always wanted a fleet of taxis, even from his teens. It had seemed an odd ambition to me, but then I didn't have an ambition.

"Where is he," she asked, leaning forward to pat her horse. Which seemed impatient to be off.

I told her he was bird watching. Then, after an awkward pause, asked her what happened to the houses that used to be across the track from the hall (in my memory it was a pretty cottage covered in some sort of creeper, possibly morning glory).

"The old station-masters house! Knocked down ages ago. White ants. All that was left was the paint."

I asked her about the timber jinker that used to sit in the ditch just up the track.

She looked puzzled.

In my mind's eye I could still sees the thing sitting there; a World War Two army surplus blitz with jinker trailer attached, rotting in a ditch, remnant of the logging days.

timber jinker
Lying in shallow ditch
under tangled bougainvillea
rusted and weathered
pathos in uselessness
stories beaten into
fenders, bumpers, running boards
bits of human stuff lodged
in jagged welds or bolt-holes
human sweat seeped into tattered seat…

"It was over there," I said, pointing past the spot where the old house used to be. "Ex-army blitz with trailer attached. Lend lease probably. Used to be a lot of logging round these parts, especially up higher in the rain forest. Cedar and Terpentine..."

She looked at me as if I'd been speaking another language.

"Before your time I guess," I said, aware that I'd been lecturing. "Anyway, there was one."

"Not in my time," she said. "We only came here ten years ago."

I felt old. Closeburn was little more than a name on a map, a place residing in certain people's memories. And they would fade. The horse called Tony whinnied and reared its head.

Billy Drahaam came waddling across the yard, doing up his zip as he came.

"That your friend?" she asked.

I nodded.

"Doesn't look your type," she whispered as he came panting up to us.

Billy Drahaam caught his breath, put his large hand on the horse's neck.

"Nice horse." he said, stroking the animal's long nose.

"Name's Tony," I informed him.

"Tom Mix's horse!" Billy Drahaam exclaimed.

"That's what he said," she said pointing to me. "Who is this Tom Mix anyway?"

That's another thing Billy Drahaam and I shared: Saturday afternoons at the Kalinga picture theatre watching Tom Mix serials. You couldn't explain that to a young woman on a thoroughbred horse, even if the horses' name was Tony. Maybe her parents had named the horse. I didn't pursue the matter.

"My name's Elizabeth," she said with a smile.

"I'm Will," I offered. "Will Traverse. And this is Billy Drahaam."

"He," she said, pointing to me with her whip but addressing Bill, "says that you two have been friends for a long time."

I wasn't sure I'd said any such thing, but I might have implied it. Anyway it was true. She was one of those women who, from a very early age, probably through reading certain kinds of books, saw people as 'characters' she could 'read'. People like that, people who thought they could judge people - and I knew a few - annoyed me. The way she looked… I knew what she was thinking: she was thinking that we were odd friends. I'd had enough of that from people making judgements about me and who I should mix with…

Billy Drahaam lowered his head, muttered a response that sounded like 'yepispose'.

For all his size and success in the cabbie business Bill has never been comfortable around people, especially those he saw as overly confident; people who 'put on airs'. For all my bravado I shared those sentiments. My mother used to say that there was no class distinction in Brisbane and maybe that was so, maybe

Brisbane was the least class-conscious city in the whole world, but that didn't mean anything when, as a child, you were confronted by wealth and privilege, as I was from time to time. Like those times going to school in the tram in my state school clothes with the Grammar School kids there at the back of the tram with their superior uniforms and snotty rugby manners. That was something Bill and I had in common: envy of privilege.

Bill's envy rarely showed, but when it did it manifested itself in a silent sulk. I figured this had something to do with his father who, as a German immigrant, had been interred during the Second World War. My own envy was more transparent and went back to my father who was from Irish Catholic stock and carried an Irish Catholic hatred towards the rich, especially the capitalists and the C of E's.

Bill mumbled something about checking his log and went back to the car, leaving me with the woman. I expected her to make excuses and go, but she stayed looking down at me from her horse, which in its turn looked straight ahead, occasionally stamping a back foot as if keen to get home and its feed bag. I studied the woman called Elizabeth, saw that she was not quite as young as I'd first thought, just well put together and, damn it, sexy. The tight clothes and toffy voice added to the effect. I found myself with, of all things, an erection. Which wasn't what I'd come all this way for. It was distracting. Was she aware of the impact she was having on me? I thinks she was. I began to have unhealthy fantasies.

"Well," she said, picking up on where she'd left off earlier, "you're an artist and he's…well he's a cabbie. And anyway I still don't think he's your type. And I don't think he was bird-watching."

"Shouldn't make judgements," I lamely offered.

She puffed herself up. "Didn't mean to offend," she said in a haughty way that made me angry. I couldn't help it; the bitterness I'd carried over privilege, long suppressed, rose up. I glared at the woman on her high horse, my erotic fantasies (and hard-on) dissipating. I must have looked stupid standing there talking to that woman I didn't know who was causing all sorts of conflicting emotions and feelings.

I was pleased, then, then when Bill came wandering back saying maybe it was time to go.

"Must be off then," she said, and geed her mount.

"What was that all about?" asked Billy Drahaam, gazing at the departing horse and rider.

"Nothing," I said. "Just some spoilt pony-loving woman with a high opinion of herself."

We got back in the car.

"Where to now Will?"

"The old camp site Bill."

"Where the fuck's that?"

"Not sure Bill. Just follow the road."

"What bloody road?"

"The one we hiked on our way to the campsite. It's just over yonder."

"You remember this," I asked as we drove along Cedar Creek Road.

Bill said he didn't, but I did.

We're a bunch of thirteen year olds, all carrying heavy loads, going away from Closeburn station past the old School of Arts hall standing defiant on rotting stumps in the middle of a weed-infested yard looking like it wouldn't survive the next wind, faded brown paint peeling from warped hardwood weatherboards, steps missing from the front stairs and an old poster advertising a dance fluttered in the light breeze, walking past a house covered in morning glory and the old Blitz truck left over from the logging days, its timber jinker still attached, lying in a shallow ditch, rusting under a tangle of bougainvillea, trudging on along a narrow dirt road beside the darkly tangled banks of Cedar Creek, past paddocks smelling of cow dung and wet grass, the evening shadows gone, the road twisting and turning, rising and falling, getting all the time narrower and darker, backpacks getting heavier with each step, going mile after mile up and down steep hills, feet slipping on loose stones, hollow sounds of footfalls reverberating off the loose boards of wooden bridges over rushing creek water you could hear but couldn't see, going on through cold valley mists and gullies dark as death, hearing dog calls that could

have been dingoes for all they knew, spooked by eerie moon glow reflecting off dams and hoots of owls and other strange and unidentifiable sounds of the night, stopping for momentary rests between the long hauls before once again moving on, singing *I love to go a wandering along the mountain trail* and other stupid marching songs to cheer them through the cowdungpossum smell and the dark passage of bats, guided only by the crunching of their own feet on the hard road stone, at one point seeing a little light high up on a hill darker even than the sky that might have been anything other than the simple light of a far away farmhouse, minds playing tricks, their poor bloody arms nearly falling off until, suddenly it seemed, they were there, moonlight falling on a patch of fresh-mown grass and, somewhere in the background, the sound of running water.

"Stop!"

"What!"

"That's it," I shouted. Back there."

In my reverie I'd almost missed it.

"The camp site, Bill. Back a couple of hundred metres.

Bill backed up and parked the car beside an open bit of ground hacked out of thick bush. We got out and wandered over to what was definitely the old campsite. From the road it looked much the same as it had when we'd camped there all those years ago: a roughly mowed patch of bladey grass leading down to Cedar Creek, walls of thick bush either side. Even the old corrugated iron shed was still there, half hidden under creepers at the edge of the creek bank. It had seemed mysterious back then and I'd wondered what it was for. Now its door was off, revealing a water pump long seized up.

"I can see it," I said.

"See what," Bill asked.

"The campsite Bill: tents, the fireplace, hessian enclosed latrines… It's all here," I add, pointing to a spot on the top of my head. "In my mind."

"You always were a dreamer Will!"

I could see it all, remembered that first night. Cold it was. Trying to sleep in tent full of snoring and farting boys.

We were about to enter the site when a tractor appeared: an old Fergie, faded grey, with no roll bar or sunshade. It stopped beside us, motor idling.

"You blokes ok," asked the driver, a big weather-beaten man with the look of a stringybark.

I said we were fine, smiling as I did at the mad tail-wagging border-collie standing on what looks like a specially-made dog platform at the back of the tractor.

"Nice dog," Bill said.

"Jack's his name," said the farmer. "Useless bugger. Keeps me company though."

The man reached back his arm and gave the dog a rough but affectionate shake.

"Hi Jack," I said, reaching up to pat the thing.

They always looked so happy, border-collies. This one, wagging its tail and lolling its tongue, was a happy dog.

"Whatcha doin here," the farmer asked.

"Just looking," I said.

"Revisiting the past," put in Billy Drahaam. "We camped here in 1955."

"Didja," the farmer exclaimed. "Bin lookin afta this place for years. Mow it once a week. Fer the scouts."

He took off his hat, scratched his bald head, put back his hat.

"Don't come so much these days," he added. "Scouts that it. If you're goin in," he says, indicating the campsite, "watch out for snakes. There's some about. Mor'en usual this time of year. Saw a couple this mornin'. Catchin' the sun."

I pointed to my heavy boots, said they'd make enough noise to scare most snakes away.

"Them boots won't help much against a Brownie. Better keep a lookout mate."

Bill said we would.

"From the city," the farmer asked.

I nodded.

"Expensive ride," he said, indicating Bill's taxi.

"It's his," I said, pointing to Bill.

"Hmmm," the farmer said over the soft chug, chug of the engine and the panting of the dog. He pulled out a pouch of roll-your-own tobacco, stuck a paper between his lips and slowly rolled a fag. He was about to put it in his mouth when he stopped and said, "Used to get lots of campers here once. Not so many come now. Used to be no trouble. Bloody nuisance they are now! One lot trooped all over my paddock just after I'd planted. New seeds ruined. Could've killed the buggers. Still, most of them are OK. Need to get out of the city they do. As I said, not so many come now."

The way he sat there on his tractor, as if he owned the place, annoyed me. He was obviously starved of human contact. I looked at his arms. They were huge. Weather worn. Skin like a lizard. Strong. He seemed part of the place.

"Like a fag?" he asked, holding out his baccy pouch.

I shook my head. Bill shook his. The farmer lit up, took a deep drag, blew smoke. The engine of the tractor chugged away. The dog, done with petting, settled down, nose to the boards, eyes closed. It was, I realised, older than I'd first thought. A working dog become a pet. It happened, even with hard-nosed farmers like this one.

"Pretty good nick," I said, indicating the Fergie (which was as much a relic as the bloke sitting on it).

"Been in the family since new," the farmer said, patting the tractor's faded bonnet. Me father bought it in '56. Doesn't do much nowadays. Bit like the dog I guess."

He turned and patted the dog, which looked up briefly at its master then went back to resting mode.

"Anyway, name's Alby. Alby Schulz," the farmer offered, extending his hand.

"Hi Alby," I said, extending my hand and suffering a vice-like grip

"And this," I added, hand finally free but still tingling from the grip, "is Bill."

Bill took the proffered hand, said "Pleased to meet you Alby."

After a bit of banter about the weather I asked Alby what sort of farm he had.

"Dairy,' he replied. "Back up the track a bit. Towards the escarpment. Family farm. What's left of it that is. No money in dairy anymore. Dad sold off some before I took over. Thought I'd stick at it. Got a good niche market now for quality cream and cheese. Keeps me goin'. Valley's goin' to pot though. Bloody city types. Tree-huggers and the like. Greenies. Pushing up rates. Wouldn't have a clue. Be nothin' left of the old farms way thing're goin'. Still… can't complain. No point. Me grandfather'ud turn in his grave if he saw what was happenin' to his valley. It's all what they call acreages now. Wealthy types from Brissy. Some not so well off bit off more'n they could chew. Had to sell up. Them's the ones I feel sorry for. Bought up big blocks only to find they couldn't manage… Spend their whole time mowin' friggin lawns with them ride-on mowers. Then, when it's all too much they sell out to some other numbskull with dreams."

He took one last drag of his roll-your-own, stubbed out what was left on the dash and flicked the dead butt onto the road.

"Well… better let youse go I s'pose. Mind them snakes now."

With that he put the tractor into gear and trundled off down the road.

I watched him go, wondering as I did about men and their lives and the way men always seem to be available for whatever task is needed; thinking about the valley and its history and how it must have been for those first settlers, the loggers and then the farmers.

We walked across the bladey grass of the camp site down to the creek. It seemed smaller, the water less clear. Maybe there'd been a drought, or what passed for a drought in this verdant valley. More likely the water had been pumped out by greedy landowners. A trickle still flowed down from the high rain forest. Pools of stagnant water from a recent flow lay beside the diminished stream. In the unclear water a plastic wrapper and a XXXX beer can polluted more than memory. There was, I realised, an unbridgeable distance between me and the boy with my name who had been here in 1955.

"Remember the rapids," Bill asked. "They flowed through here."

He pointed to the trickle that now ran through large flood-stained boulders.

"Not much left of them. Or the big pool we swam in."

I looked downstream to the shallow stagnant pool we used to swim in.

It's the first morning and I wake with a start to find the camp already buzzing with activity and a great fire blazing, breakfast tables set on trestles and the others lined up with their plates held out for porridge dished out of a huge pot, wondering at the way things were so often organised without any input from me, as if the world was a place in which others planed and carried out the necessary tasks, leaving me as an observer, and it's early afternoon, sun beating down and we are racing across the bladey grass, stripping off our clothes as we go, diving recklessly into the clear cold water of Cedar Creek, plunging down rapids that take us hurtling between great white rocks to a wide still pool where we float laughing naked and cold before running back upstream for one more turn, screaming boys filling the quiet country air with noise till, exhausted, we stand shivering naked on the bank, rubbing ourselves down with towels and laughing at tubby Bobby Reed who, cold from the water, has no penis at all to see.

Now, all these years later, I think about those kids; at least the ones I can remember. There was Billy Drahaam of course; big, flabby and almost six foot even then. He lived in Henry Street, not far from the scout hall. His father was a large man with a German accent; a milkman in the days when milk bottles were square glass things delivered to your house. I was at Bill's place one day when his father arrived home driving a brand new International truck. It was green, with an especially made tray and canopy for the milk bottles. Mr Drahaam was proud of that truck and kept it to the end. After he died, unexpectedly, from heart failure, there were no more milk deliveries. He was the last Kalinga milkman. Billy Drahaam became a businessman of sorts, running a fleet of taxis. He remained my best friend.

There was Gary Lee whose real Christian name, I learnt later, was Chong. He lived in Bertha Street with his parents who were Chinese and didn't speak much English. I went to his house often. His mother didn't say much but smiled a lot. His

father was a short bent man who worked the Chinese Gardens on the far side of Kedron Brook, hoeing neat rows of vegetables plots hacked out of thick bush near the footbridge where the man was found one day hanging from underneath. Just up a bit from the gardens, hidden behind creepers, was a black hole in the cliff face; an old mine where, so they said, three men were trapped and were still down there. That part of Kalinga Park was spooky. Like the mine, the Chinese gardens have long gone. Gary Lee became a lawyer. I see him occasionally. He has a property in the Samford valley.

There was tubby Bobby Reed: the one who stood shivering on the bank of the creek after one of our swims, seeming to have no dick at all. Not that any of us had much to show, all shrivelled up from the cold as we were. Bobby Reed was a joker, told good stories but sometimes made himself look silly. He lived near the Eagle Junction railway station. For a while there he and I sold newspapers for threepence on the outbound platform. I lost contact with him after primary school. I don't know what he's doing but suspect it's something to do with sales.

Jonny Long was tall and skinny and lived near Wooloowin Station. When we were seventeen he and I joined the same surf club. He was a great swimmer and ended up training for the Olympics. He and I were doing laps in the Valley Pool one day. I asked him to slow down so that I could keep up. He said he couldn't swim that slow! He was He ended up in the plumbing trade.

Tommy Gear lived across the park from us in Jimbour Street. His father was in the ALP and was a friend of my father's. Tommy Gear played rugby league at grade level. He was pretty tough. My family followed Australian Rules football. Tommy Gear called it 'Arial ping-pong', which my father took exception to. Last I heard of him he was selling cars in some crappy South Brisbane used car lot.

There were others whose name reside back there in the obsolete computer that is my brain. We were just kids bewildered by life, trying to fit in to what ever it was we were supposed fit into, boys who became men and went our various ways into the wider world.

"Remember the sawmill," Bill asked.

It's the second last day of the camp and we're on an old logging track, returning from a long hike up into the rainforest, passing by an abandoned sawmill and I want to stop and investigate but it's getting late and the others want to get back for dinner so we press on only later that night, after everyone has settled in, I convince Billy Drahaam and Gary Lee to come with me back up that same logging track we'd come down earlier in search of the sawmill. It's pitch black in the spooky forest and our torches flash as we go. We find the place and go in, poking about among dark machinery lying silent under a great iron roof that creaks and snaps with the wind and the cooling night. The clouds part and the moon shines through gaps in the corrugated iron, reflecting strange light off rusted steel surfaces and in that light the place looks complete, as if ready for the next morning's consignment of logs.

No logs would come because logging had long ceased in those hills. No workers would come to start the machinery and there'd be no smoko next day or any day after. Years later, looking back, I wondered where all those workers went, and where they'd come from in the first place. I wondered, as I had on many an occasion, how there always seemed to be a ready supply of men ready for whatever enterprise might need them. I remember the time I went with my father - it must have been an Anzac Day march a year or two after the war – and how we'd stood watching what seemed to be a never-ending line of men in uniform marching and my father saying something about the eternal sacrifice of men. And I wondered again how there was always a supply of men when needed and how it didn't matter if it was for war or industries like that abandoned sawmill in the forest where the men had long-gone leaving things behind for boys to play with in the spooky night.

"You ok Will?"

"Just remembering the sawmill Bill."

"Wasn't the only scary bit," he added.

I asked him what he meant.

"The last day," he said, "when we were coming back across that paddock and you stopped by that mound of earth."

We'd been for a swim in one of the rock pools beneath a waterfall further up the creek and are walking along a high ridgeline when I stumble over a mound of earth. The sun, declining westward, throws a shadow across the mound. I go to the top of the mound and see that it's not a simple mound but a curving wall of earth. It's covered in weeds and grass but clearly visible in that light. The more I look the clearer it becomes. It's like a circus ring and about thirty paces across. Tree shadows, lengthened by the lowering sun, fall across the mound, emphasising its height. I am intrigued, and a little frightened. I have goose bumps all over me because it's just like the bora ring at Nudgee, only in more open country. I can hear the others shouting from a distance for me to come on but I can't move. Their calls, become more urgent, echoing off the surrounding hills.

"And I had to come and drag you away," Bill added.

"I found out later, Bill, that it was a bora ring."

"Oh," he replied. And…"

"That's where we're going now."

"To this… bora ground?"

"Yes. It's the real starting point for me."

"What was all that back there then; Closeburn and the camp site?"

"A preamble, Bill. Setting the scene."

It was late afternoon by the time we got there, the sun already sinking behind the ranges, long shadows falling across the road. Bill parked the car and we went through the fence to the ring.

"How did you know where it was," Bill asked. "After all this time."

"Research, Bill."

"Looks different," he said.

It did. Back then it was just an overgrown mound overgrown with weeds and covered in cow dung. Now it was cleared and fenced and trimmed. Someone was looking after it.

"There's a path!" Bill exclaimed, pointing to a narrow pathway that led from a gap in the southern rim of the ring.

"It leads to a smaller ring," I said, pointing south, "somewhere down there."

"What's it for," he asked.

"It's a bora ground Bill. Kippa rings, some call them. Initiation place for young men."

And I explained how the boys, aged thirteen or so, would be taken from the large ring and down the path to the sacred ring.

"How old is it?"

"Don't know Bill. Hundreds of years. Maybe more. Boys would be brought here from far away. Far as Stradbroke Island. There are reports of this one being used in the late 1800s, well after the arrival of the Europeans."

Bill walked around the ring. He wasn't normally inquisitive but I could see that he was intrigued. He came back, stood beside me. He was quiet, caught up, as I was, in the mystery and, well, defeated majesty of the place; the kind of feeling you get at ancient ruins.

"They reckon we have no ancient historic sites here," Bill mused. "But this is one, isn't it?"

Neither of us spoke. We just stood there beside the ring, the light fading fast.

"Guess it's time Bill. Time for you to go."

Billy Drahaam sighed. I walked with him to the car. He opened the driver's door but didn't get in. Instead he turned to me, asked me if I was sure about what I was about to do. I said I would be ok.

"It's a long walk. How long will it take," he added.

"To the city? If I leave early I should be there by early afternoon."

"You're a mad bugger Will. Anyway, if you survive maybe we'll catch up tomorrow. I'll be in the 'Empire' most of the afternoon. Meeting up with some blokes. Call in."

I said I would.

He climbed in, started the car, wound down the window, leant out, said, "See you then you mad bugger."

The car disappeared down the road, leaving a vacuum that pressed on my ears. With a shrug I walked back to the ring.

"Too old," I said to a cow grazing just beyond the enclosing fence, "for this sort of thing."

The cow mooed a tired reply then went back to eating grass.

Strange things cows; all that weight and strength just from eating grass! My father joked once, when we were driving in the country, 'see that lump of grass over there…' I couldn't work out what he was on about. Then he pointed to the cow and asked, 'What came first, the cow or the grass?'

My father and his stupid jokes.

The heat from the day had gone. The birds had begun their noisy settling in for the night. Cool air drifted down the escarpment. The last long shadows of trees fell across the earth and over the mound of the ring. Despite the weathering of all the years since it was last used the ring, the gap in the wall and the path that led from it, were all clearly visible.

Beyond the ring's eastern rim the land sloped steeply down to a creek. To the south the path followed the same ridge line we'd come along all those years ago. To the north, just beyond the ring's embankment, was an old gum tree. It seemed old enough to have been there when the ring was last used, but probably wasn't. To the west the land was thickly wooded. Between gaps in the forest cover I could see parts of the main range, pale blue in the evening light.

The last real light of day had gone, fence posts and wires had faded into a fecund background of bush and trees. In that half-light the outline of the bora ring was clear, curving round in a near perfect circle thirty paces in diameter. It was indeed like a circus ring. I marvelled that something so old could have survived all those years.

With the light all but gone and the land hushed to night it was possible to imagined a world before the coming of Europeans, to imagine men coming into this wild and unpolluted world to build the two rings and the path that joined them. What, I wondered, would it have been like to be have come, at the age of thirteen or fourteen, to such a place, to have travelled across a vast land untracked by paved roads and unlit by streetlamps; to have come full of fear and expectation to this great circle carved out of the body of the earth; to be without shoes to protect your feet, or tins of camp pie to ease the hunger, or pillows to lie on at night; to have no

way of knowing what might be in store from one moment to the next as you journeyed from the maternal security of childhood through a world known only to the initiated, becoming aware, little by little, of the secrets of a land that would become, bit by bit, yours.

How long would the ring survive? The outer limits of the city were just beyond the hills that formed the eastern rim of the valley. New suburbs were pushing through the gaps into the valley and the old farms were being turned into country estates for the wealthy and the fools. How long would it be before this once-sacred bit of country was sold off for some hobby farm and the ring's embankment levelled for horse stables; how long before there was nothing left to remind anyone of what had been, the bora ground become just one more power source lying dormant beneath the body of the earth, with nothing at all, apart from maybe a brief mention in some ancient document hidden away in some obscure library reference section, to remind anyone of what had been. The dirt road would be sealed so that the shining four wheel drives of landowners wouldn't get dusty. Ride-on mowers would trim imported lawn where once the bora ground had been; driven by people who could not understand that what they had built had no real or lasting economic foundation, that their dream acreage would succumb, eventually, to a returning bush that would, in some undreamed of variation of what had been there in the first place, reclaim the land.

On a flat bit of ground just outside the ring's embankment I spread out my thin ground sheet and lay down. I was tired and looked forward to sleep. But sleep didn't come. The ground was hard and damp, the night cooler than I had expected. I lay there listening to the sounds of the night: owl hoots, grunts and hisses of possums, sigh and snap of dry branches and other unidentifiable noises, all the time feeling an uneasy sense of being watched.

2

When, finally, I did begin to fall into that wonderful pre-dawn oblivion of deep sleep the birds began. It was the kookaburras first, followed by crows, magpies, butcherbirds, parrots, whistlers, whipbirds and a dozen other species that, at some other time, I might have taken an interest in. And beyond all that call and chatter, like some hardly perceptible but insistent bit bass player in some madly out of tune and misdirected orchestra, from out of the thickets along the creek, came the deep booming grunts of the Pheasant Coucals.

I rose from the hard ground, breakfasted from my meagre supplies of dried fruit, biscuits and condensed milk, repacked what was left and, steeling my resolve, walked into the middle of the ring. As I stood there the same feeling of being watched I'd felt during the night returned.

I looked up at the great gum standing just beyond the circle's northern rim.

"Who are you," I asked.

"I am the guardian of the ring," the tree replied.

"So it was you watching me during the night?"

Silence. A waft of early breeze stirred the leaves of the tree, a rustling sound. The sun rose from behind the eastern rim of hills. The first shadows of morning spread across the ground and over the ring's encircling wall. I stood there in the centre of the ring, facing the guardian tree, waiting for a signal, something to indicate that what I was doing was ok. Eventually a call did come from the tree, a loud falsetto cry:

"Teewhee, tewaaaaa… Tewhew…"

The call, sudden and clear, rang in the air for a while then declined to silence.

There's something special about Currawongs. You never see them in the city, only in the hills. They are birds of the high country, representatives, I always thought, of a pure and unpolluted world. If ever they succumbed to our relentless progress, as so many species have, that would really signal the end. I called up at

the tree in a pathetic imitation of the bird's call. Then waited. After what seemed ages an answering call came clear and pure through the morning.

"Tewhew…"

And the bird, clumsy at first, flew out and away, calling out of the sky as it went. I watched the great black bird grow smaller and smaller against the blue. Then it was gone. I turned and walked across the ring, through the narrow gap in the ring's enclosing wall and onto the path.

At first the path was clear and easy to follow, the tall trees that lined it giving the impression of a cathedral aisle down which one might walk as to some sacred alter. The sun, already well above the eastern hills, fell through breaks in the canopy spotlighting clumps of grass, fallen twigs, wildflowers... Dark shadows fell across the path, creating cool lees where dew persisted. In more open parts the rising sun had already drawn the moisture from last night's fall of humid air. Cicadas buzzed. Small birds tweeted from the surrounding forest, parrot shrieked from the tall trees and Coucals drummed from thickets. A breeze whispered through the treetops, a soft voice.

Once there was a vast and godless land without ceremony or ritual, without the necessary markers by which people could make sense of it, a world without definition, with nothing to define or give boundaries to the people's lives. Tired of this chaos and formless existence I called the people together and told them that things must change, that they must define the various stages of life, that they must establishing their rituals and ceremonies in accordance with the nature of their world. I found this place and had the people build these rings. They scraped them out of the earth with what simple tools they could make and we laid down a path between them and placed along that path images of animals and birds and other things that sustained them. And into that place I had them bring the young ones whose minds were open to the unexpected and who had the capacity to imagine. From the ring they were led them along the path to see all of the things that had been put there and they were amazed. And there were among the things which they saw all the acts of the wise men and all the tricks of those well instructed in the arts

of mime and magic and, towards the end, they were confronted by the simple but fearful gestures of the priest. Oh, the trials were long. They were pushed to their limits, until they shed tears of pain and frustration, until they were so tired and miserable that they could take in nothing from the external world. They did not stop there, but went on and on, not for a little way and not for just a day, but for many days, so that they might know that they had left behind what must be left behind.

The breeze died. I walked on, aware of the heavy crunching of my boots on the soft earth. They seemed like separate things, not part of me at all. High above, the muted murmur of morning breeze carried bird song through the leaves. As I walked I continued to marvel that the path had survived. To walk along it seemed a special privilege. I was in awe of the people who'd come to carve these circles in the earth, who'd done it in accordance with certain laws and without the aid of steel picks or shovels or theodolites or stringlines or laser beams. With only the tools they could put together from local rock and flint and wax and fibre they had dug and scratched and pushed at the earth until, with endurance we would find difficult, if not unnecessary, they moulded these rings out of the earth. And then they made a pathway between them. But the path would never again feel the patter of young and eager feet. The last neophytes to walk the path had long gone.

About two hundred paces from the large ring the trees gave way to open country, affording glimpses of the surrounding hills. After the path became less clear and I had to concentrate hard. As I went, eyes firmly to the ground, I saw something that stopped me in my tracks. It was, I realised after close examination, a set of cart tracks etched faintly into the ground.

I was at a crossing of ancient pathways!

The cart tracks came from the direction of the road one hundred metres or so to the west, crossed the bora path and continued on down the slope towards the creek. How old were those tracks? Who had driven the cart? What were they doing here?

A young man steers a rough wooden cart through virgin bush. A silent young woman sits beside him, all their belongings piled in the back. They are heading towards their selection, following directions given by folk along the way. They've come all the way from England, suffered months on a slow boat and a year in Brisbane town saving and searching out opportunities until the offer of this selection came up. They've come all this way, the woman trusting her hard-working man in their venture into this wild and untamed land.

Following directions on a rough-drawn map the man turns off the main track and heads across country between tall trees. The cart bumps wildly. The woman starts. The man looks down. He sees a narrow pathway dug out of the earth, the sides piled up to form two low parallel ridges. The grass that grows between the ridges is greener than the surrounding bush. He knows that the path is not of any white man's making and wonders if it is part of some ancient network, and if those who made it are still around.

He has heard stories of terrible massacres dealt out by the blacks to unsuspecting settlers in the early days and, while word is that these things no longer happen, that the black people have long been dispersed or herded into missions, he is nevertheless worried. He says nothing to his wife, simply purses his lips and urges the horse on down towards the creek.

He builds a house from local timber and bits of iron and other stuff brought out with difficulty on drays from the town. He fences the property with wire strung between rough posts cut from the forest trees. He brings in a few dairy cows and erects a milking shed. It is foretold, he tells his pregnant wife one cool evening sitting out on the makeshift veranda looking out over the creeks, that we will prosper.

They survive the first hot and humid summer and a short dry spell during which they lose one cow. But there are good summer rains and the grass grows long and sweet and the cows produce good milk for which they are paid good prices and in time they become an established part of the valley's growing community of dairy farmers, sending their milk to the new railway siding at Closeburn where the cans are piled onto wagons and taken to the factory at

Dayboro to be turned into butter and cheese to be sent back down the line to Brisbane. With high hopes for their community they help build a School of Arts hall at Closeburn where their children go on Saturday nights to dance away their troubles.

I gazed down the slope to the creek. The land along the creek had long been cleared but there was no sign of a farm down there, only, on the far bank, on a bit of level ground, the remains of a stone chimney and, further along the creek's flood plain, some disturbed land where, maybe a dairy shed and its fenced yards used to be.

I thought of Alby Schulz, the last of the dairy farmers. I wondered about the valley and how, despite its fertility and closeness to the city, no wealthy dynasties ever evolved within it. There had never been, and would never be, any landed gentry or, for that matter any great local culture. In the early days few earned enough, or had the time, to indulge in the finer things of life. Maybe a certain son or daughter would be inspired and, with luck, find their way out of the valley into fields their parents never imagined; some to dance, some to sing, some to play in the theatres of the world. But for the most part the people of the valley struggled along until the dairy business struck outside competition and the small farms were taken over or amalgamated or simply sold out, leaving struggling dairy farmers like Alby and their ancient tractors and underemployed dogs.

For a time - until the boom in residential acreage - nothing replaced what had been built up over decades, leaving dormant land and houses, never substantial in the first place, at the mercy of creepers and white ants, to gradually merge with the earth until there would be nothing to show where they had been apart from overgrown lumps of dirt; a hidden palimpsest of lost dreams.

As I stood there musing on a past long gone, and for the most part unmourned, a milk truck came thundering along the road, it's furious noise breaking my reverie. Dust billowed up behind. A pair of Rosellas flew up, scarlet plumed, chiming calls of surprise. The truck went on. Dust settled. Country quiet returned. And with the quiet came a familiar sound, and a sudden realisation of what had been there all along; that vague and disquieting deep bass that seemed to

come from the very earth itself, a sound in tune with my own heart's beat. It was the Pheasant Coucals, booming out from the clumsy thickets of their lives. Maybe, despite all the vanities of all the people who would ever occupied this land, despite all the scratchings and markings that people would make on the earth, despite all of that, something as intangible, primitive and earthy as the clumsy call of the Pheasant-coucal would remain.

I heard the truck again, faint and far away, labouring up a distant hill.

Sally Ann McCann, in the air-conditioned cabin of her milk truck, changes down a gear, turns up the radio. She'd noted the stranger standing in the bora ground. She knows about the place but has never been inside and has no time to ponder the man's purpose, apart from wondering vaguely if it's some academic from the uni doing research. She pushes the milk truck on, radio blaring country music, oblivious to all but the road, hands tight on the wheel, face hard-set in determination to meet her deadline. Sally Ann McCann, daughter of Frank McCann - himself from a long line of Samford farmers who, without much in the way of education, but with a bit of luck, had once made a reasonable living from the land - steers the milk truck on towards the new bulk milk depot in the city. Not normally given to introspection, she does sometimes think about her father's life; how he'd prospered until the price of milk went down and it all became too hard and he sold out to a corporation that amalgamated several farms; how he found work with the railways and became a guard on the old Dayboro line in the days when there were still a few hundred dairy farms between Samford and Dayboro, most run by small families who had their milk carted in cans to rail sidings like Closeburn, how he used to say that that was the main business of the railway, that and the odd load of sawn logs or cattle for the meat markets, telling his daughter that the milk cans communicated messages through their progress from farm to siding, that they carried not just milk, but news and, most important of all, a certain communal purpose.

Sally-Ann had been told about the great railway crash of 1955 and how eighteen people had been killed and how the railway had been closed soon after

and how her father, old by now and with no prospects of further work, had retired and, within a year, had died from boredom.

She steers the expensive Japanese-built prime mover on, shining tanker behind, heading towards the depot with a load of bulk milk, her job a continuous round of mechanical pickups with hardly any need at all to leave the cabin of the truck and few opportunities to talk to anyone, doing the work of a dozen men of Frank McCann's time but somehow understanding that something was missing, that the blarney talk of old, which bound the people, and their bigotries and misplaced ideologies, was long gone and that what was left for the most part was only sullenness. The milk truck, with its stainless steel efficiency, displaced the railway with its rugged uncertainty and need for human contact and the small holdings went and the cart tracks that once led to them and that once carried the milk cans to the rail head were no more. Sally-Ann McCann, who'd left school at fourteen, the same year her father died, unnecessarily, through some mix-up at the local hospital, sits high above the humming road, the constant vibrations of the diesel engine forcing her to play her country music far too loud, day dreaming of her horses, wanting only to get to the depot, sign off for the day and spend the last hours of daylight in her paddock with them.

Sally-Ann McCann, with her limited education and lack imagination feels the valley. It is in her blood. And while she would never be able to articulate her feelings, they are nevertheless strong. Beyond her horses and her job lies the valley she loves for its ripeness and mysteries. There are places, she knows, where no one has been, places deep into the foothills below Mount Glorious where there are secret waterfalls and pools of clear water and giant cedar trees that escaped the axeman's blade. For all her inherent conservatism and backwoods demeanour she cares. She is a member of the local fire fighters brigade and a Friend of the Earth. She does not want her valley spoilt, has difficulty accepting the hobby farmers and country clubs of rich city people that are springing up all over the valley. Sally-Ann McCann goes to the simple wooden Uniting Church on Sundays and sings simple hymns to a god she really doesn't understand. Sometimes, when she is kneeling there in the little church, she dreams of olden times.

The sound of the milk truck faded. The sun was rising fast. I turned from that ancient intersection of lost dreams and continued on along the rapidly deteriorating path. For a while I lost it completely, only picking it up again just as it turned sharply to the east and entered densely wooded country where, after a good deal of searching, I found the small ring. There wasn't much left of it, just a faint outline in the earth about ten paces in diameter. The site for this ring had been well chosen. By curving the last fifty paces of the path in an easterly direction and running it slightly downhill towards thick bush it was effectively out of sight of the large ring. From what I'd gathered from my readings this was important in secreting the ring from the eyes of the women and the uninitiated. If the path had at times seemed like a cathedral aisle, with the trees along each side like columns and the light through the canopy like the light through clearstory windows, the small ring, surrounded as it was by thick bush, was like a private chapel into which only those initiated or about to be initiated could enter.

I was neither.

Gathering my courage I stepped into the ring and lay on my back on the hard earth, squinting up through half-closed eyes at trees sailing through fluffy white clouds. Fighting giddiness, I closed my eyes tight against the light, found myself drifting through an uncertain space. Sharp twigs dug into my flesh and the grass itched but I did not flinch. Gradually the sounds of the bush faded. I felt incredibly tired. Gravity pulled me down into the earth. There was nothing I could do to stop the pull. I fell into the earth, accepting oblivion.

I run and run as if pursued, a blur of bush rushes past, unfocussed and directionless. Stones cut my feet. Sticks cut my legs. Yet I go on, on and on through a dry bush that seems never to change. I enter a clearing where the light is diffused and murky and there are no shadows. I am lost. I look for signs but there are none. I am alone yet sense keen eyes watching my every move. I am trapped, unable to escape. I rush at the wall of bushes that surround me. They give way. I am free, running and running across an open field devoid of trees. I cross the field

and come to a small creek where cool clear water tumbles over smooth round rocks. I look down at the rocks. They are faces staring pleadingly up at me from the depths. But I cannot stop. I go from there across a ploughed paddock. Out of furrows long abandoned ugly weeds grow. Through the damp weeds I race towards a mean-looking farmhouse made of timber and fibro with shoddy outbuildings and old rusty rainwater tanks lying on their sides. In the bare yards are stinking kennels where savage dogs wait. I go on, past the house that is deserted and dark like death, past the kennels where no dogs lie. I come to an open gate in a rusted sagging barbed wire fence. I go through the gate to a dirt road that runs beside thickly wooded hills past abandoned farms and the rotting remains of milk stands and rusted gates hanging half open, past old telegraph poles growing out of weeds. From the top of one pole, more upright than the rest, an owl peers down at me. As I pass beneath the owl changes into a young boy with a small round stone in his mouth. He sits there, on the top of that pole, holding out the stone, watching I as go. Outside an abandoned sawmill twelve boy scouts in untidy uniforms sit disconsolately among their scattered camping gear in the long roadside grass, silent as ghosts. I pass but they do not see me. When I turn around they are gone. I am climbing through dry grass and tall thin tree trunks beneath a canopy of brittle leaves. I come to a gully with steep banks of exposed white rocks. Across the other side of the gully a man stands motioning to me to come. I go to him but when I get to the other side he is gone. I am running through an eternity of bush, running and running until I come to a great open field bathed in mist. Way out across the far side of the field, through the rising mist, I see a house on tall black stumps and a stairway going up. I race towards it, towards the security it offers. But the mist closes in, then lifts, and it is all bright light.

I rose from the hard earth of the ring, stiff and sore, dazed by the light and more than a little disorientated, slowly regained my composure and stepped out of the ring.

3

I pulled out my journal, did a few hasty sketches, scribbled a few notes, packed my things, left the bora ground and followed the narrowing dirt road until it ended at the base of the escarpment. Ignoring the 'no trespassing' sign on the barbed wire fence I entered the forest and began to climb. At first the way was easy, the forest relatively clear of undergrowth and the grass dry. It was quiet, the air scented with eucalyptus, light broken into shafts and beams streaming through the canopy. A light breeze blew through the top leaves but on the ground all was still. From hollow places came the smell of nocturnal animals holed away for the day. From the thickets came the soft sounds of small terrestrial things. Lizards scurried at my approach. Here and there, in low and shady dells, dew persisted. Whipbird calls rang out like Pistol shots from sources impossible to pin down and, from all around me, came the high winding buzz of cicadas.

It was a warm in the forest but the canopy offered shade. Every now and then a breeze swept down through the gaps and blew the sweat away. I began to feel good, almost elated, glad to have left the bora ground behind, with all the complex and conflicting emotions, all the contradictions and uncertainties the place aroused in me. In the forest I felt free. I found myself thinking erotic thoughts. Soon I was sporting a very stiff erection! Visions came to me of M, my one time on again off again lover. I recalled a time we'd gone bird watching in the forest at Y. It was a warm summer's day. She wore a 60s short denim skirt and loose-fitting man's shirt with no bra and half the buttons undone and men's hiking boots with thick socks round her ankles. She looked great! Bird watching! Ha, ha! She wasn't interested in birds, or nature for that matter. That was the sort of thing I was interested in, which in her eyes made me a little weird. But that day I had other things on my mind. We were on a narrow path, she skipping along just ahead of me, forest on either side, birds calling. Then she suddenly stopped. I bumped into her. She turned, murmuring, 'Fancy bumping into you Mr Traverse' in her cheeky

sexy mischievous way. We stood there gazing at each other like, well, lovers. Then she stepped back and provokingly took off her skirt and… the rest was a blur of ripping clothes and hard fucking…. Bloody hell! I couldn't stand it. I unzipped, pulled out my hard and eager cock and, right there, beside a tall gum tree, shot hot seed onto the dry ground. Embarrassed but relieved I zipped up and continued up the hill.

The climb got steeper. I wasn't really prepared for such an undertaking, had done no training so cursed when, sweating profusely and believing myself nearing the top, I came upon a gully that was too steep and tangled to cross. There was no other way; I had to go round. Which meant a delay I couldn't afford, not to mention further depletion of my rapidly fading energy. Whenever I stopped to catch my breath I could hear the thumping beat of my own heart, feel the pulse racing in the back of my neck. At one point, unable to continue further, I sat on the ground, back propped against a tree. When my pulse had slowed sufficiently I took out my journal and began a sketch. Sketching a forest from inside is difficult. There's no vista. Maybe that's why there are so few great paintings of forest interiors. All I could do was make shapes, concentrate on small things, like the negative spaces formed by the changing directions of branches (eucalyptus trees don't curve like European trees, they abruptly change direction, forming sometimes acute angles along the line of a branch). For anyone interested in line this can be both interesting and challenging. I was finished the sketch when, from out of the corner of my eye I caught a movement in the undergrowth. It was a Goanna! The thing scurried out and settled on a bit of exposed rock, so close I could have reached out and touched it. It was magnificent, sitting there basking in a beam of sunlight coming through the canopy, its great tail arced back towards its body, its head held stiff. The cicadas, which had been quiet, suddenly started and the goanna's head tilted slightly. It seemed to be looking at me but I could read nothing in those evil-looking eyes. For a long time we stared at each other. So still was the thing that I reached for my pencil and journal, intending a quick sketch. But the goanna, startled by the sudden movement, ran off, loping across the undergrowth on surprisingly long legs, a primeval creature out of the dinosaur age.

I went on, sure that I was near the top. But the undergrowth thickened and progress became more difficult. I cursed each and every obstacle (and there were many), hoping there'd be no more gullies going the wrong way. Eventually I reached my goal, crashing through the last barrier of trees and undergrowth onto Mount Glorious Road, sweat pouring from every part of my body. I took off my backpack and sat down, pulse throbbing so loud in the back of my neck that, for a while there, I could hear nothing else. After I'd calmed the first thing that registered were tinkling bells.

Bellbirds!

I hadn't heard that sound in years. Not since that day, way back in the summer of 1948, when I'd come up this mountain with my parents.

It's hot and humid and everyone's testy, thick rain clouds have been building all day but the sun is still streaming through gaps and, even on the veranda, where it's usually cool, it's hot. My father suggests we take a drive up the Mt Glorious Road to Jolly's Lookout. He says it'll be cool there. My mother says, No Al it's too late in the day. The radio said there'd be storms. But my father insists and we drive out of the city and into the hills, all the windows open and I'm peering out as the car speeds on, marvelling at the forest and the deep gullies from out of which tall white-trunked gums reach for the sky, my mother tells my father to slow down every time we sweep through a bend too close to the edge for comfort. Finally the car is slowing and my father says, Here we are, and we get out of the car and it's cool standing at the edge of the escarpment looking out over the coastal flats and across the bay to the white sand hills of Moreton Island way out there on the horizon. After a while I become aware of the sound of bells. Bellbirds, my mother says. And she tells me that they've always been here and that once they establish a colony they stay. A gust of wind rushes up from the plains below and we smell rain and my mother says we should go back but my father says we'll be fine. There's a bolt of lightning, followed by a clap of thunder. My father says, Speed of sound son; thunder follows lightning. My mother says, For goodness sakes Al, lets go. But the trees are shaking and the wind is roaring up the escarpment, whipping the trees and snapping branches and the rain is falling heavy

and a tree crashes violently to earth, bringing smaller trees with it and we are racing to the car where it is safe and my mother wants to go back down the mountain right away but my father says it's too dangerous going down that twisting road in that storm and so we sit in the steaming car. My father tries the windscreen wipers but they are useless. Outside the car it's a roaring scene of flashing lightning and clapping thunder and rain falling in sheets through the protesting canopy. In the gloom my father tells a story about a murder in the forest and how they'd found a body in a shallow grave not far from where we sat safe in the car and my mother says, Stop it Al, you're frightening the boy. But I'm not frightened and ask for more but my mother says no as the rain eased and the bush settles back and the cicadas start up louder than before and my father tells a story about the forest, how it is a living thing and that every part is connected and that after the last of the summer rains it will settle into a quiet sleep and that even the cicadas will be quiet but that at winter's end, with the undergrowth tinder dry from no rain and the trees exhausted, lightning will strike and flames will lick at the undergrowth and, fanned by dry westerlies, the flames will bust up and out, roaring across the gullies and up the steep slopes to engulf the whole land and the forest will crack and snap and animals will be engulfed and the fire will leave black stumps but there'll be seeds and with the first big drops of summer rain green shoots will emerge and the gums will spurt forth new growth and that's how it is: fire and flood the history of the nation. He might have gone on but my mother says we should go and I wind the window down and hear again the tinkling bells…

My mother was right about Bellbirds. Some things don't change.

I sat down on the roadside embankment, preparing myself for the long walk down to the city. Apart from the Bellbirds and the intermittent buzz of cicadas it was quiet. Beams of sunlight broke through the canopy and settled on the road surface. The road was narrow and winding, with just enough space for two cars to pass with care. A couple of hundred metres downhill the road split in two before turning sharply. A white painted wooden railing divided the high up side from the lower down side. It was the kind of wooden barrier that has mostly been replaced

by more modern, far less aesthetic but no doubt more effective metal crash barriers. Creepers and vines cascaded down the embankment between the two lanes. It was, I thought, a pretty sight. Then, beyond the forest sounds, I heard a faint hum. It came from somewhere down the road. The sound rose and fell, constantly changing volume and direction, but all the time getting closer. It was a vehicle of some kind, coming fast up the road. As I sat there, waiting expectantly, a lizard scurried out from the undergrowth, not far from where I sat. It ran onto the road and settled on a patch of sunlight. It was a Frill-neck, a perfect creature gathering into itself sufficient warmth for its own needs. There's something oddly beautiful about frill-necks, with their colourful patterns reminiscent of the ancient art of the people of the dry interior of the country.

The humming noise grew in volume. Then, from round that pretty bend just down the road, a red sports car appeared, engine working hard against the grade. The car came fast. Maybe it was the vibrations on the road surface, maybe it was the sound waves from the car's engine, but the lizard propped on surprisingly long legs and extended its frill. It was a wonderful sight that frill-neck with its hackles up, bravely warding off unspecified danger.

The car passed in a red blur, leaving a flatness of red and grey matter on the road's surface; blood and bone that would be assimilated, even before the crows could feast, by the tyres of other passing vehicles into the bitumous surface of the road.

I stood up, stretched, hitched my backpack and went loping down the road, leaving the flattened lizard to nature. I began to enjoy the easy walking on that hard surface, breathing in the clear mountain air, thankful for the tall gums that shaded the road surface. The hard part of my journey – the long climb out of the valley – was behind me. Yet I carried a nagging feeling that something had been left behind, some unfinished business, as though down in that valley I'd left behind part of me, and an experience that could never be revisited.

Walking down that road, on that hard and even surface, was easy. There were few cars to disturb the quiet. I assumed a steady marching rhythm, drifting into an almost trancelike state. Apart from an occasional rise the way was mostly

downhill. With the bush so close on either side there was little to see. Which suited me fine. All I wanted to do was drift along. Then, quite suddenly, the road curved close to the escarpment's edge and the roadside vegetation opened out to reveal the sky. From a rock ledge at the very edge of the escarpment I stood looking out over the valley I'd recently climbed out of. It seemed another world.

Away to the north, across the valley, a spur of the main range eased gradually down to the coastal plains. To the east, beyond the humid haze of the lowlands, I could see the bay. The white sand hills at the southern extremity of Moreton Island shimmered in the morning light. From where I stood I could see nothing of the city or its spreading suburbs. This was an illusion brought on partly by the angle from which I viewed the scene, partly by the dense tree cover, and partly by the morning haze of humidity. There were houses and roads down there, hidden for the moment by a tree cover that, from this angle, looked denser than it really was. I marvelled that a city of such size could entirely disappear.

A Currawong called, so close it startled me. The bird flew out into the open air above the valley. I watched that great black bird wing its way north, wings beating steadily, then gliding, then beating steadily again in undulating flight; a black shape getting smaller and smaller against the vast sky, its call reaching out across time. And for a moment there I might have gone soaring like that bird, heading out over the land towards the distant places.

The bird vanished, leaving empty air. Far below, somewhere within that valley, were two rings of earth, a campsite and an abandoned railway siding. That valley contained more of me than perhaps I fully realised. From where I stood it seemed small and distant, like a memory. The man who, just hours ago had walked between two ancient rings of raised earth, seemed as far removed from me as the boy who'd stood on that railway platform at Closeburn thirty years ago. I thought of the cicadas (at that moment buzzing loudly) and how they left behind their empty and ghostlike carapaces.

From where I stood the valley seemed almost empty of human habitation. I wondered how long that would last. If one day the suburbs did overtake the valley it would only be the latest of a series of onslaughts that had begun with the loggers

and continued with the farmers. Perhaps the damage had started long before the first logging tracks were put down. Perhaps it had begun with the first scraping of the earth for the bora ring. I shook myself free of such negative thoughts and continued down the road.

The road narrowed between high banks covered in thick undergrowth. Once, as a bet with Billy Drahaam, I'd gone into a railway tunnel near the Mayne Junction railway yards. It was in the days before railway security. Bill, who hated taking risks, would wait for me at the other end. It wasn't a long tunnel but curved and quickly became dark. As I went I became aware of how little space there was between the rails and the sides of the tunnel and wondered what I'd do if a train came. Would I press myself against the sooty sides or lie down beside the rails? I had the same feeling at that point on the road when, from up the road, I heard the sound of a motor coming fast. The sound was familiar. It was, I guessed, the same red sports car That had flattened the lizard, now rocketing back downhill, heading back for the city after a bit of hill-climbing fun. At the same time I heard, from the down side, a different motor working equally hard. It was a motorbike, coming fast, pitching to higher revs at every downshift, tyres squealing round bends. I pressed myself against the embankment and waited.

The car came on, changed down a gear, turned into the bend just up the road from where I stood pressed against the cutting wall. It came on fast, the same car that had squashed the lizard. At that precise moment the motorbike screamed round the bend just below. It was one of those Japanese bikes that run at incredible revs, the rider leaning forward, back parallel to the road, neck bent up in what always seemed to me an excruciating posture (unlike the relaxed posture of your black-clad Harley rider who, while maybe slower, manages to look superior). The road was the kind bikers (especially those on Japanese bikes) love; leaning into the bends, fantasising they're breaking some long-standing hill climb record. I waited for the two racers to pass.

The car came fast, downshifting before the next corner. The bike came just as fast, engine screaming. The driver of the car had drifting into the up lane in preparation for the bend. But he saw the bike too late and overcorrected. Next thing

I heard (but did not actually see), above the roar of the bike speeding uphill, a squeal of tyres followed by a sickening crunch. It wasn't particularly loud (looking back I found that odd) but it sounded and felt like the crunch of metal on something solid. I ran down the road. There, twenty metres beyond the corner, I saw the car. It had climbed a low bank and had wedged itself into a large tree trunk. Steam issued from its bonnet. The driver sat in his seat, very still. Apart from the rapidly diminishing sound of escaping steam the only sound was that of the bike's engine fading up the hill.

I went up to the driver, said something stupid like, You OK mate?

But he just sat there with this stupid grin on his face (the same one I thought I'd seen earlier, although I may be imagining this), like some child in a sideshow bumper car who'd just crashed into someone and was a bit embarrassed but at the same time enjoying the fun. Only this was no bumper car and this was no child. And this was not funny. Gingerly I reached out my hand and touched his shoulder. He didn't move. The strange thing was I could see little blood. All I could see was a dark purple mark on his forehead with a bit of blood oozing. I guessed he must have been thrown forward on impact and then flung back into his seat. He looked relaxed, sitting there as if any moment he might open the door and step out (this in fact did happen; not then but later in dreams).

The steam from the radiator eased then stopped. In the dreadful silence that followed I began to sweat. What the hell could I do? I was a long way from any phone but couldn't leave the bloke there.

I heard an engine coming up the road, this time slower, more laboured. A delivery van appeared. It stopped and the driver, a young man, maybe in his mid twenties, got out.

"Shit,' was all he said.

He went over and peered in. "Shit," he repeated. Then looked at me.

My mind was racing. I thought about the bloke on the bike, how he'd be oblivious to what he'd left in his wake, aware only of a passing near miss, all else drowned out by the roar of his own engine. I thought about the driver in the car

with his stupid grin (a grin that would also appear, disconnected from any face, in future dreams). I panicked. What could I do? I felt bloody useless.

"What do we…," the delivery man began.

His unfinished and unanswered question hung in the air as we both turned at the sound of an approaching vehicle. It stopped and a woman got out.

"Oh my God," she said, her hand over her mouth. "Is he…?"

Another uncompleted and unanswered question!

Out of the corner of my eye I caught a movement from the direction of the smashed car. The driver had moved! I raced over to him but it was just the shadows of leaves moving in the breeze. The shadows flickered across his dead face. I looked at the others. The young delivery driver was in a state of shock. So was the woman. I was in the company of people even more hopeless than me.

"Drive," I ordered the woman. "There's a village just up the road. Must be a phone box there. Ring 000. Get them to send police, ambulance…"

She drove off. The delivery driver, who said his name was Frank, muttered that he'd better be off. I took his details and he drove away. Leaving me with the dead driver. Oh, and, some way off in the forest, beyond the cicadas (which might have been buzzing away all the time for all I knew), the sound of tinkling bells.

The police arrived first, followed closely by an ambulance, sirens blaring. I gave the police all the details they needed, described the events as best I could, then made my excuses and left.

4

After you've been in the bush for a while it can be good to be among houses and streets again. You may even feel, as I did, a sense of pleasure when, from out of the endless grey green of eucalyptus and wattle, you see the darker mass of a mango tree, or the purple blossom of a jacaranda. We claim, some of us, to love the bush. But it's an abstract love most of the time, one that, on close contact, can turn nasty. For the bush holds secrets and terrors, like those hinted at by my father that time we waited out the storm on that mountain lookout. So, yes, I was pleased to be out of the forest and to feel, well, safe!

Just before Mt Nebo Road turned into the more suburban Waterworks Road, not far from where Enoggera Creek flowed out of Enoggera Reservoir and began its winding urban phase, I came across an old house set back in an overgrown garden. Many of my generation who left Brisbane seeking opportunities the city could not provide took with them memories of such houses; houses they had either lived in or remembered through grandparents or distant relatives; houses haunted by ghostly old people in slippers or dressing gowns wandering latticed verandas where light rarely penetrated or wandered through dark inner rooms smelling of musty bedclothes or pottered about with their hobbies under-the-house, all seemingly oblivious to a faster world that would soon overtake them. There were many who, having experienced such houses, and all that they stood for, or against, would, at times when loneliness struck from distant places, or some vague longing for home surfaced, try, mostly with limited success, to recapture their mystery.

There are sentiments that such old houses evoke, like the awful sense of something gone forever; a sense of wonder and faint yet ungraspable memories of aunts, uncles, grandparents or distant relatives you visited once. Like the memory of riding a trike around a wide shaded veranda scattered with children's things, shadows on canvas blinds in a dark corner where an old man slept among boxes

and piled up washing. Houses where half open French doors offered glimpses of dark interiors of ornate woodwork and heavy dark old furniture and, yes, light coming through a stained glass somewhere. There are such places in my memory, houses untouched by fashion or time, changed only by the weather and the seasons, emitting a spirit more organic, more natural, than any new house possibly could.

From the front gate of that house on Waterworks, with it's dilapidated trellis of overgrown Bougainvillea, I gazed down a long gravel path that curved between scented frangipanis and poincianas. At the end of the path the house stood proud on tall black stumps, its red roof stained with rust, its once-white weatherboards peeling. A wooden staircase, rickety and weather-beaten, led up to a veranda closed off to the outside world by wooden blinds.

At first I didn't notice the old woman in the garden. She was just beyond the gate, kneeling by a bed of ancient roses. In her shapeless cotton dress with a flowery printed design and a tattered straw hat she seemed part of the garden, oblivious to the outside world, working steadily at her weeding and pruning. A hose dribbled unattended onto the lawn. I watched the water trickling. For the first time since leaving the bora ground, felt a desperate thirst. I coughed. The old woman looked up.

"Beautiful garden," I said.

She laughed, indicating with a withered hand all that needed to be done. Then, with effort, she stood. She looked at me for a while then, maybe noting my rumpled clothing and floppy hat, said, "You're obviously not selling anything."

"No," I replied, "Just on a walk. My water bottle is empty. Don't suppose..."

"Oh, want some water do you! Well, come in. Help y'self."

I pushed open the gate and went in. It was odd. As soon as I stepped inside that gate it was as if I'd entered a different world. Even the traffic noise from the road seemed muted. I filled the canteen, thanked her and turned to go.

"And what is it; this walk you are on?"

I stopped, told her that I wasn't sure what it was about, that I was working that out as I went.

"You must have come from somewhere, she said. Must be going somewhere."

They were statements as much as questions. I told her I'd come from the Samford Valley and that I was heading for Stradbroke Island.

"Won't be able to walk all the way, she smiled. Not Jesus Christ are you, who and can walk on water!"

Dry as a bone she was.

"For charity is it? Fundraising?"

I said it was a private thing. Then, to stave off further explanation, asked if she'd lived there long.

She straightened her back, took off her gloves, placed them on an ancient garden table.

"Would you like a cuppa? About time I had a break m'self. By the way, name's Edna. Edna Abel. And yours?"

"Will. Will Traverse."

"Come on up then Will."

We sat on the front veranda sipping hot Lipton's tea and looking out over the garden. It was good sitting there out of the sun, away from the noisy road. She said it was nice to be able to talk to someone who didn't want something from her, who wasn't trying to sell her something.

"The only people who come now, apart from salesmen," she said, "are my children. Checking on their inheritance. Or real estate agents wanting to buy the land. I cannot abide the thought of this house being pulled down and the place turned over to pathetic little blocks jammed full of brick houses. No difference, really, between my children and the estate agents. Both want the same thing. Well no one is getting it. My children don't know, but I'm leaving it all to charity. I won't give them the satisfaction of knowing that they are not included."

She paused, added. "Sometimes I wonder if I have become too bitter."

She sipped her tea, looked at me.

I mumbled something along the lines of 'not at all.' and sipped from my own cup.

"Being the diplomat now are we? Anyway, what are you really doing?"

I told her that when I was fourteen I went on a hike with the scouts and that during that hike I'd stumbled across what looked like an overgrown mound of dirt but that when I looked more closely I saw that it curved around to form a circle and that it seemed really old and that I had just stood there, unable to move, looking down at this thing.

"And what was this circle," she asked.

I told her how, years later, I found out that it was a bora ring and that I had tried to learn about them.

"Oh," she said, "I know a bit about them. I once taught at a school at Murgon. Black children. Delightful most of them. Hopeless situation though. No future. There was little I could do for them. I saw children who were full of life give up. Not their fault, but it was too much for me. I asked for a transfer back to the city. Guess I gave up. Maybe things are better now. I hope so. Reason I know a little about boras is I had an uncle who was a great story-teller. Bit of an adventurer too. Once he told us a story of a bora ceremony he'd seen somewhere. I remembered because the way he told it was so dramatic. The word bora stuck. Then, when I was teaching at Murgon some of the local children came in one day all excited about a bora ceremony that they said was to be held. It turned out that some of the older people - there were still some older people then who could speak the language - intended reintroducing some of the old ceremonies. As it turned out nothing much happened. Problem was they were all from different places; had been taken there by the government. Could never agree on anything. Sad really."

She paused, sipped more tea, looked at me, said, "Anyway, you were saying..."

There was something about that old woman…she reminded me of a teacher I once had, one of the few I liked, the kind of person you wanted to share your thoughts with. Besides, it was comfortable on that veranda. So I told her about my walk, how it was a way of finding out who I was, that I was attempting to connect with the past, with some things that had an impacted on me as a child.

"And what were they," she asked.

"Well, there was the bora ground. For some reason that affected me. Not just at the time, but later."

"And what else Will?"

When I was small my father took me to the Holy Name Cathedral…"

"You mean that old ruin near Centenary Place? Never thought there was anything but ruins there."

"There wasn't much," I replied. "Just a high stone wall that went right around the site. And a crypt. That was only finished bit. My father took me down there once. I must have been six or seven. It was dark and partly flooded and there were statues lying in the water, statues of Jesus and Mary. I don't know why he took me there. Well, I maybe I do. I think it was to scare me. He hated the church, which he'd turned away from. He was a great hater my father. And I was scared."

"And what's the connection with the bora ground," she asked.

I told her they we both places where young people were initiated, that they were both ruins of cultures that had or were vanishing.

"Well, the old people… you know, the Aboriginal people; they have different priorities now. And Christianity is, well, not the force it was. The old cathedral site; it represents something that's lost too. Or not what it used to be. It's all hard to explain…."

"I think I see what you mean Will," she said with a far-away look.

I sipped more tea, wondered how long I should stay.

"And the island," she asked. "How does that fit in?"

I told her that, after the camp at Cedar Creek, our scout group went to Stradbroke Island, that we'd camped somewhere out from Dunwich and that we'd met up with some black kids who showed us a midden at a place called Myora Springs near Moongalpa where Kath Walker lived.

"Kath Walker," Edna Able exclaimed. "I met her once. Great poet. Changed her name to Oodgeroo. Oodgeroo Noonuccal."

I told Edna Able that I had met the poet a few years later, that she had had left a strong impression on me, but that she wasn't the reason I was going there.

"She had an impact on many people," Edna Able said bluntly. But you say she's not the reason you're going there."

I tried to explain that it was the midden and the whole mystique of Myora and its history and how I'd read a book by Thomas Welsby called *Early Moreton Bay* that talked about Myora and Moongalpa and the people there and that it seemed to me that that was one of the few records we had of early life in Moreton Bay and that Myora would be the final site of my walk.

"It's odd," I added. "After I'd decided on the three sites I looked at a map and found that that if you drew a straight line between the two Aboriginal sites it would pass through the three sites. That seemed more than coincidental. For some reason it all made sense."

"It's a long way Will. What do you hope to achieve?"

"Maybe a better understanding of the city and its history. Maybe my place in it."

She sipped more tea, said teasingly, "You'll have sore feet by the time you finish!"

I told her that they were already sore.

I sipped the last of my tea and rose to go.

"The kids in that school at Murgon," she said, "they should have been taught their own history. All that stuff we were supposed to teach about the empire. Kings and Queens of England. Meant nothing to them. I thought it meant something to me back then, but I wonder now. There was no balance in our education. We could all have benefited from a better understanding of the land. Did you read *The Tree of Man*…that terrible inevitability of family decline. All Stan Parker's hard work, and then to end up with that horrible son - Ray wasn't it – who threw it all away. I see my children, and their children, and I worry. Lost something, they have, make up for it by consuming. Same thing is happening to them, in a way, as happened to the children at Murgon. Loss of values and nothing to replace them with. But I'm an old woman. It's a different world now, not much I can do about it."

I looked out over the veranda rail, saw not a faded garden but a vast emptiness in which images swirled like pieces of paper in the wind, images of dead people, of houses thin as gossamer, all blowing away.

I was brought back to reality by another question.

"What are you calling this walk?"

I told her that I was calling it the Brisbane Line, partly because …"

Before I could finish she interrupted.

"Will, let me tell you a story. I was nineteen when the American troops came to Brisbane. There were thousands of them. I was a trainee teacher, boarding with an aunt. They were exciting times. I was reasonably pretty and no different to any other young woman in wanting the most out of life. Most of our young men were away. The Middle East, Asia, Europe… Suddenly there were all these young and handsome Americans, with money and need for company. They were heady times. There were dance halls everywhere: the Trocodero in Melbourne Street, the South Brisbane Town Hall, Cloudland. Cloudland was huge. The biggest dance hall in the country. There was a funicular railway going up to it from the tram stop on Breakfast Creek Road. Sometimes at night, taking that little train, it felt like a real cloudland. It's gone now of course; the building and the railway. More's the pity. I was young, as I said, and loved the excitement. We'd never experienced anything like it. Big bands, jazz, swing… You hear people say that life was hard then - rationing and all that - but we were free spirits. It was inevitable that we'd be attracted to the soldiers. I was. In those days we were not taught about sexual matters. There was no contraception to speak of, although some of the Americans at least had condoms. We weren't allowed to even mention such things. Anyway, to cut a long story short, I met an American soldier from Idaho. He was young. Surprisingly naive. Brisbane was the biggest city he'd ever seen. Can you imagine that, someone thinking Brisbane a big city? Many of the troops were like that, from small towns on the Prairies, or from the mid west. Then there were the black soldiers, but they were confined to South Brisbane. That's another story. The Yanks had something the Australian men didn't; at least the Australian men who were still around. Things like silk stockings and banter; the sort of talk we weren't

used to. You know what they said, ‘over paid, over-sexed and over here’. It was true. Anyway I fell in love with my man from Idaho and, of course, got pregnant.

My family was a mixture of Irish Catholic and Methodist. I was raised Methodist. Terrible bigots really. I was taught nothing about life. Nothing about sex. Not at home, not at school, or teachers college. I was a teacher, supposedly educated, yet I was ignorant of the most basic things. Anyway it happened and my condition soon became obvious. My parents loved me, I know, and I wondered how they’d react. As it turned out they were reasonable under the circumstances. Calm, you could say. In the meantime my soldier had left. Went to Guatemala or some horrid little island in the Pacific. He never knew about the pregnancy and I never saw him again. Could have been killed far as I knew. The child was taken of course. Adopted out. I never saw it, except briefly at the birth. Never have since. I have no idea where it might be, or if it is still alive. I say ‘it’ because I never knew its sex.

I married a few years later, a returned serviceman he was, a decent man, but limited. We had children - greedy buggers - and lived reasonably good lives. He died early, of cancer. After my mother died I came back here to the family home. My children were married by then, or on the way to being married. Now they are hovering, waiting for me to die.

The war was the end of innocence, for me and for this city. I was an innocent country girl. Brisbane was a big country town before the war. Afterwards things began to change.”

She stopped, looked at me. “Sorry. Couldn’t help m’self. You’re the first person I’ve told that to.”

After a long silence I said I had to go. She sighed, said she was sorry to keep me.

We went down the front stairs and along the path. Over to one side of the house, beyond the flower gardens, I saw what looked like the remains of an orchard. Among the twisted lemon trees and sad-looking oranges were blighted old peaches and others fruit trees that were unsuitable for our climate, trees that clung on as if hoping for climate change. They were like old people, hanging about

waiting to die. I thought about the woman's parents and the struggle they must have had to keep the place going as a viable farm, how they must have tried their hands at everything from growing stone fruit through to running a milk cow or two, with chook runs providing eggs for the market and a bit of fresh meat at Christmas, only to see bits sold off over the years until all that was left was the old house and a couple of acres of ground.

At the front gate I turned back to her, unsure how to say farewell.

"Goodbye, Mister Traverse," she said, and waved me away.

5

I walked away from that old house, past the chicken shitless yards of post-war houses (the second world war, not the first) and their manicured lawns and spotless driveways, plodding along the footpath looking, no doubt, like some smelly old derro.

The Gap was a post-war suburb set between older suburbs like Ashgrove and the densely wooded bulk of Brisbane Forest Park. It was working class, the houses for the most part cheaply built. Unlike the newer brick houses of the sprawling suburbs to the north and south of the city the half-wooden houses of The Gap retained the fragile subtropic feel of older Brisbane, settling into gardens full of colour: poincianas and jacarandas and Silky Oaks and blue hydrangeas and ferns and orchids and a host of subtropic plants that, in cities with less benign climates, would have had to be kept indoors.

I walked on, traffic getting heavier as I went. A young man washing his cars in a spotless driveway gave me a look that didn't seem too friendly. Two young children playing in a front yard waved to me and shouted greetings. Their mother appeared and gave me a look that said 'move on'. I began to feel uneasy. An old couple waiting patiently at a bus offered a cheery g'day. A postman on a red scooter shouted a friendly greeting on his way to the next letterbox. I began to relax. Then a woman pushing a pram with a writhing screaming child approached, gave me a wide berth and a suspicious look. Two small dogs yapped furiously from behind their picket fence. Ease turned to unease.

I didn't like that suburb and that suburbs didn't like me.

The Gap lacked the patina of time, the wear and tear of wind and weather on stone and timber. There was no crumbling mortar or faded weatherboard to add mystery or intrigue. The only threat to the lives of the people who lived there was nature; the bush which, in this subtropic clime, had to be constantly held in check. So that there was a constant noise of lawn mowers and chain saws, hedge clippers and shredders, blowers - electric or internal combustion - and the clip, clip of a hundred variations of hand tools designed to keep that growth at bay. The residents,

with the help of the local council, had done a good job; from the road there was little to suggest the jungle the suburb had replaced. Except along the tangled banks of Enoggera Creek, or at the edges of public parks where Council's motorised mowers couldn't reach. In such places the remnants of the fecund bush would, given half a chance, re-invade. So, I thought to my self (perhaps a little uncivilly) as I walked past the man wielding his hedge clipper, 'you better watch out mate!'

In the chicken shitless yards men mowed lawns, trimmed shrubs and trees, cleaned swimming pools. Inside the houses wives cooked and cleaned and children watched television. Everything honky-dory. Hey, that's an old expression! One my father used. No one in these houses would say that. It was an expression out of time and out of place. I felt more and more an outsider.

In the chicken shitless yards husbands set up the BBQs, fixed things in the shed or simply took the evening air after a day at work; wives hung out the washing on the Hills Hoist or pottered about in the vegie patch or joined their husbands, taking in the air while children played footy or cricket and dogs scratched and cats napped and lizards hid and butcherbirds and magpies waited for scraps.

In the chicken shitless suburbs people walked their dogs, carrying plastic doggie bags, schoolchildren walked disconsolately to school, old people waited for busses, postmen brought letters (bills) and tradesmen turned the speakers of their utes up loud. Yes, all was well as I passed out of The Gap and into the older western suburbs.

In this part of the city the streets wind and wind, forever changing direction, forever rising and falling before turning and rising and falling again. This was a place of strange topographies, where roads suddenly ended or split in two or widen unexpectedly into multiple one-ways, or rise dangerously to stop signs, leaving motorists unaccustomed to such gradients grasping for handbrakes.

Along the stony ridge through Ashgrove and Ithaca I went, past time-weathered houses and shops redolent of history, past high-rise units and grotty flats, retirement villages, antique stores, local groceries and supermarkets, continental delis, Asian takeaways and middle-eastern cafes; all reflecting

changing demographics. Shop awnings offered welcome shade from the blazing sun. From intersections narrow side streets dropped precipitously to gullies where bushland snuck like tendrils from the ancient forests, easing its way into the urban fabric of the city. Some call this a shabby city, but I liked hotchpotch of different houses and the way the bush intruded, and the way odd creatures like scrub turkeys and goannas and possums and a whole range of tiny birds infiltrated backyards.

I walked on. The pavement was hot. My feet hurt. I drifting into such a trance-like state that at one point it seemed I was walking over a thin layer of frosty glass, treading carefully lest it shattered and I fall. Down there, below the frosted glass, deep down and indistinct, people were walking. I saw a young boy following an old man; dark figures from some ancient time, drifting away, heading in the opposite direction to the one I was heading, fading into some obscure past while I, on the brittle surface, walked on towards an unknowable future. Other figures appeared, deeper down and more disturbing, like scenes from half remembered dreams. The souls of the underworld drifting past, drifting past…

The heat and the long hours on the road were getting to me. I felt detached from the everyday world. The places I walked through, the people I passed by… they were not places or people from any substantial world at all, but fleeting illusions, set pieces that once I passed fell away like props in a stage play that had no meaning. The world I walked through changed the moment I passed.

Just beyond the bridge over Ithaca Creek the road turned into a cutting and I found myself walking beside a high rock wall festooned with creepers and ambitious figs, thankful for the shade the cliff face offered. Tired from hours on the road I stopped, unhitched my backpack and sat down on a rock protruding from the wall. I took off my boots and socks. My feet stank! I took off my hat. Sweat poured from my brow. A different smell! I looked at my watch. It was nearly midday. I'd been walking since dawn.

I pulled out my journal, made a few notes then began to sketch the scene. I found myself wishing I'd brought watercolours, for, beyond the far side of the road the land, in contrast to the side I was on, flattened out before falling away into a gully out of which rose a riot of colour: purple jacarandas, bright red flame trees

and orange poincianas, golden silky oaks; all set among deep green foliage. This was the leafy inner western suburbs; weatherboard house almost hidden among the trees, apartment blocks rising up out of the trees and, in the distance, the pale blue hills of the western ranges. From where I sat, in the shade of that wall, it seemed idyllic.

That was until the police car pulled up on the opposite side of the road and parked on a bit of flat ground on the far side of the road under a flowering Poinciana. Two officers – a young thickset woman and a portly older man – got out and began setting up a speed trap. They'd picked their possie well. People driving into the city along that road wouldn't see them until it was too late. Then bingo! One hefty fine!

I watched them set up their equipment. The woman seemed keen while the veteran looked as if he was simply going through the motions, maybe even a little ashamed of what he was doing. Beneath the shade of that pretty tree she held the gun, pointing it purposefully at the unsuspecting drivers as they sped past on their way to unexpected fines. This was 1981, the bad old days of Queensland politics, when the police had unprecedented powers and you had to be careful not to antagonise or challenge them. I knew all about that from my run in with police over demonstrations against the Vietnam War and the Springbok tour back in 1970. I'd ended up in the watchhouse the night after the Springbok game and took a bit of a beating. Vietnam was a bad memory and Apartheid was all but gone but the Queensland government and its support for brutal police powers hadn't. I didn't like the look of that policewoman, thought it best not to draw attention. I kept my head down, drawing and writing notes in my journal.

I sensed eyes upon me and looked up. She was staring across the road at me, hard blue eyes beneath her blue hat. She was solid all right! With her tight skirt revealing large strong knees and her flat black shoes and her stern face and lipstick just a little too bright she looked a formidable person. I didn't like the look she gave me. I buried myself in my journal, sketching madly and making notes along the margins, hoping she'd forget me. But all the time I could feel her staring. Something was about to happen.

When I looked up again she was handing the radar gun to her companion and saying something to him. He didn't seem keen but shrugged and took the gun. Then she set off, coming across the road towards me. I watched as she came through the traffic, a sinister mechanical smile on her face. It seemed to take ages for her to cross. And as she came those red lips assumed absurd proportions, floating there like a hideous hallucination, with every step growing ever more sinister. She stepped onto the footpath and stood in front of me. I looked up into a face that seemed to have been formed by years of hurt and hatred. Was she going to make me suffer for all the abuses had she had suffered. She had the pressed uniform. I had the smelly socks.

She asked my name.

"Will," I said.

"Surname," she demanded.

"Traverse," I replied, louder than needed. "Will Traverse."

She asked me to stand. I did. Out of the corner of my eye I could see her companion, could sense that he obviously didn't want any part of this. But he wasn't going to intervene. Fat comfortable bugger! I answered her inane questions about where I lived and what I was doing, getting all the time more and more angry. Why the hell, I thought to myself, should I put up with this nonsense. I suggested that she had better things to do than interfering with an innocent flaneur. Shouldn't have used that word (I'd only discovered it myself recently), knew, even as I said it, that it was a mistake. It set her going. She called me a smart-arse, started threatening me with vagrancy. But I could see she was flustered. Said she'd call for help and that I'd be sorry.

I asked her what I would be sorry for.

It was getting a bit heavy but I was in no mood to back down. She pulled out a little book, was about to take my details when a voice called down from above.

"Will," the voice called, "it's Arthur. Are you coming up or what?"

We looked up, the policewoman and me. There, leaning over a balcony of the building overlooking the cutting, was an old man in a dressing gown and, beside him a young woman in a nurse's uniform.

He called down again, "Come on up Will. I haven't got all day."

"Your uncle is getting anxious Will," added the nurse. "Go round the corner. You'll see the new gate. It's signposted: 'Gracelands Retirement'. Arthur's on the third floor now. Room 21."

Then she winked at me. I caught on, turned to the policewoman, said I must be off, that I had to see my uncle.

She looked at me suspiciously for a moment, then turned abruptly and went back across the road.

The old man's door was open.

"Come through Will," he called from the balcony.

I went out.

"That looked like getting awkward down there," the nurse standing beside him said with a smile.

I thanked her and the old man for rescuing me.

"Sorry about all that," he said, indicating the road below. "Had to rescue you since I started it all."

I asked him what he meant.

"Willed it to happen, you know. Soon as I saw you coming down the road like some latter day Jesus Christ I thought, 'I'll have some fun'. Only it got out of hand this time."

"Willed it to happen," I said. "What do you mean?"

"I sit here a lot you know. Not much else to do around here. Great view don't you think."

I looked out over the balcony, agreed the view was good.

"Sometimes," he said, interrupting my viewing, "I like to pretend that I'm directing events…You know, the great director from on high. Sitting here it's easy enough. I direct the traffic. It's fun. Sometimes I cause accidents. Well, make believe I do. Passes the time."

"Arthur's a devil," the nurse said with a wink. "Always up to tricks aren't you Arthur."

Arthur looked slightly annoyed, then smiled.

"Veronica's the best," he said. "Not quite as patronising as the others".

Veronica grimaced at me, said she had things to do and went away.

"She the only one doesn't treat me like I'm dotty," Arthur said.

"Seen her before you know," he said, indicated the policewoman who was back at her post and busy with her ray gun. "Takes her job too seriously. Gives me the creeps. Anyway, there you were, walking down the road. Don't get many hikers passing through here. Not on any tourist route I'm aware of. Then you stopped. Just down there. I had to lean over to see you. That's when I thought, 'Oh, I'll cause a bit of mischief. Get her to see you as a threat'. Worked didn't it?"

I laughed.

"Oh I know it's all an old man's fancy. But I did will it to happen. And it did. But when it got out of hand. I had to act. Heard you say your name. 'Will'. I had a son called William. Died in a car crash. Anyway, I didn't catch your last name.

I told him it was Traverse, thanked him for saving my day.

"Glad to be of help. Good to have some company. I was a surveyor once you know. One of my jobs was to survey this very cutting". He indicated the road below. "Started with just two lanes. Followed an old track some said predated the arrival of the Europeans. Aboriginal track. Made sense. Followed the ridgeline west to the mountains. You can follow that line all the way to Mount Glorious and beyond. Would have been the obvious route for trading stuff: ochre, stones, flint…that sort of thing. Least that's what I was told. We widened it through here, took away some of this side until we hit solid rock. That was well before this damn nursing home was built. Before the traffic got to be what it is now."

He looked at me. "Not saying much are you?"

I murmured a reply.

"Don't like her anyway," he continued. "That cop woman! Legs too heavy. Have a thing about women with big legs. Bit of a prejudice huh? Anyway, first

time I saw her she reminded me of something. Then I remembered. It was those images of German women during the war. The second one, that is. Cheering the storm troops on. Looks in their eyes. No pity. She's like that with the cars. Would be with anyone. Just doing her job! Then she saw you and it had to happen. You came along, an alien. Least you were an alien to her…Got out of hand. That's when I took pity on you. Saved your bacon..."

He stopped, looked tired. He looked a bit young to be in such an establishment. Sixty something. I wondered about that, about men and where they ended up. I wanted to say something but couldn't find words. The fact is I was tired. I was also pleased to be able to sit for a while in comfort, to regain some energy. The thought of going back out onto that road wasn't pleasant. I began to wonder if it was really worth finishing what I'd started.

Arthur Doyle must have read my thoughts.

"What are you doing anyway? Don't get many people walking through these parts with a backpack and hiking boots. Come clean. Secret's safe with me."

I told him roughly what I'd told Edna Able.

He looked at me for a long time, then he said, "Brisbane Line, huh! I served my time you know. Volunteered. I was a bit old but they put me with the Survey Corps. Out of Enoggera originally. Got shipped to Moresby. Ended up on the Kokoda trail. Missed all that stuff about the Brisbane Line. Never knew about the Battle of Brisbane until I got back. By the time I got home the Japs were beaten. I was never sure what my part in it all was. When you're there, y' know, on the ground as it were, you don't really know what's going on. You're caught up in it, trying to survive, putting up with terrible boredom and even worse conditions. You only get the big picture later by reading about it. Or someone's version of it. We're all just ants you know. Soldier ants. Farming ants. Building ants. No difference between ants and us really. Just following orders. Or instincts. Us males…like sperm we are, desperately struggling through the soup. Towards what? Oblivion? The war! Humph! I just took things one day at a time. I was lucky. Survived. Plenty didn't. Saw my best mate killed. Young he was. Much younger than me. Anyway I returned. Married soon after the war. Never spoke about it to my wife.

Or the kids. Hard to talk about it really. Was never asked anyway. They must have known I couldn't talk about it. Funny how the big things are the most difficult to explain."

Arthur Doyle went quiet. I looked out over the hills of Ashgrove and Kelvin Grove. Old Brisbane: wooden houses on stumps among treed hills. I loved it. Here and there new highrise units sticking out of the surrounding vegetation like, well, anthills. Visions of the future. City of anthills. Old Brisbane becoming New Brisbane. Arthur and me; we were caught between the two. I looked at Arthur Doyle. He'd fallen asleep.

The nurse came back, said Arthur was like that; that he'd suddenly drop off. I thanked her again, asked her to thank Arthur for me, then took my leave.

6

This is no ordinary journey I speak of. The people I met, or passed by on my way, even the places themselves, they were not people or places from any substantial world at all; they were fleeting illusions, set pieces that, once passed, vanish into a time and space that was meaningless. We are all travellers. Sometimes we leave records of our journey but they are eventually lost. Mostly we are forgotten the moment we pass by any particular point. Arthur Doyle's sperm indeed!

Not far from the corner of Waterworks Road and Enoggera Terrace, where the trams used to go sparking out along the high stony ridge towards Bardon and Rainworth, I came to an art gallery with a welcome sign out front. I went in, unhitched my backpack, took off my hat and plopped down on the only seat in the room. It was cool in the gallery, away from the fierce midday sun.

I'd visited that gallery several times over the years; usually at openings when the crowds were so thick you could hardly see the artworks. I'd watch the owner of the gallery moving about, working the crowd, wonder how he could be so genial knowing that few among the crowd were collectors and that at least some came only for the free wine. In all those visits I never met him. I wouldn't have known what to say if I had.

But that day, resting from my walk, with no opening crowd, the place looked different. Empty. The front gallery, where I sat recovering from the heat of outside, was just a plain white room with two doors; the one I'd come through and one leading to a second gallery. A large window of frosted glass, across which passed shadows of passing pedestrians, took up most of the front wall. On each of the three remaining walls were large painting, all of a similar size, all textured fields of off-white paint on unprimed canvas enclosed in thin aluminium frames, as if some sort of border was needed to distinguish the blank textured fields of the painted canvas from the flat white fields of the untextured walls. It wasn't the first commercial exhibition of minimalist paintings I'd seen but it was the most severe.

It was only when I looked closely at the apparently blank canvasses that I realised they were not blank at all, but subtly textured fields of paint that changed as the light coming through the frosted glass window changed. The shadows of people walking by outside affected the surface in peculiar ways. But then, I realised, the light did the same to the blank walls. I thought of John Cage's 'Three Minutes and Thirty Five Seconds' or whatever it was called, and the way he expected the audience to hear the ambient music through the silence. It was all a game but I liked it. In some ways it was like my mother pointing out shapes in the clouds when we were children. The artist is a child. Picasso never grew up.

I was musing on these profound matters, my journal open on my lap, when the owner appeared framed in the inner doorway. He looked smart in a blue and white striped shirt and cool grey slacks, shiny leather boots and hand-made bow tie. The expensive clothes, casually worn, reinforcing a general air of confidence. He had a fresh, still-youthful face with a crop of thin hair parted along one side, narrow but pleasant eyes and an equine nose above a full mouth. Only the bulge of his stomach, showing under the cool shirt, indicated a certain over-indulgence in the good things of life. He annoyed me.

"Nice show," I said, indicating the paintings. "Don't mind me. Been walking. Need a rest. Doing a thing on local galleries for a journal. Thought I'd catch up on my notes. Hope that's OK."

He sidled over, introduced himself as Timothy Potsmith (which I knew), said he was pleased I liked the work. Then he asked my name.

"Bloom," I lied. "Leon Bloom."

Timothy Potsmith pulled a packet of cigarettes from his top pocket, offered me one. I said I didn't smoke. He lit up anyway. There we were, him standing there, puffing on his cigarette, me leaning slightly forward on the seat, looking up at him, neither of us knowing what move to make. That's how we were when the front door opened, letting in a tide of street sounds followed by a woman dressed casually but expensively in black tights and billowing pink silk top. She drifted confidently into the room and would perhaps have embraced Timothy Potsmith had she not, at the last moment, seen me. Instead she stopped in the middle of the room,

looking first at him standing there with his cigarette poised, then at me, the tramp. I did the gentlemanly thing and, putting my journal aside, rose from my seat.

Sometimes we find ourselves in situations where we are like actors in an amateur dramatic production, where we're not quite sure what move to make next, or what line to say. The world's a stage to be sure. And so too, at times, are rooms. And sometimes the people in these rooms are rendered immobile. Even the most confident people can face this situation. In that white room, with its minimal furniture and minimalist paintings, we three stood frozen like a three person Gilbert and George. From outside came the muted sounds of traffic. People passing by along the footpath cast shadows across the frosted glass. Funny the things you note in such situations. I noted the sound of a jumbo - that particular sound one associated with that slow lift into the sky peculiar to Jumbos - climbing out of Eagle Farm, its crew and passengers oblivious to the little scene playing out in that room.

We sometimes face uncomfortable truths. There, in the very being of the gallery owner, and his partner, was a truth I could not escape. In his very make-up he was the flip side to the cultural poverty of my own upbringing, a man who carried with him the legacy of generations of privilege. Fortune's fate. From which he, Timothy Potsmith, had clearly benefited. And as I faced this reminder of the envy I'd felt as a child towards the private school boys and all they stood for, resentment rose like fire from my belly and, for a moment there, threatened my hold on the situation. Did my father's left wing politics, which I'd inherited, come down to this; envy of the pathetic private school kids in their boater hats laughing together at the back of the tram on the way to school, chatting away as if they owned the world.

There were apocryphal stories about Timothy Potsmith, including the one about how he'd come from a wealthy family with a huge house high on Hamilton Hill overlooking the river, from where the strains of opera arias could be heard; how his mother sang with the best overseas companies; how his father had inherited a clothing business which he ran with a heavy hand until the drink got the better of him, leaving the family with barely enough to get Timothy through

university and a lasting and ruthless desire to succeed. It wasn't hard to believe, even if the rumours had been built on envy. Timothy Potsmith certainly gave every indication of succeeding. He worked the art market and, so they said, was making a killing. He had a reputation for taking risks and promoting young emerging artists no one else would touch. That, I reckoned, required some degree of confidence, if not bravery.

And the woman standing there in the middle of the room with her expensive clothes and her perfect hair and her nonchalant air…she wasn't all that young, just expensively presented. She annoyed me too, with her oh-so-well-groomed appearance, as if she'd just come from some equestrian event out Brookfield way. She reminded me of the woman on the horse at Closeburn (indeed, for a moment there I thought it was that other woman). There were stories about her too, how she was the daughter of a Toowoomba family that could trace its history back several generations to Darling Downs squatters who'd ruthlessly built a rural empire that survived the droughts and depressions that had send others to the wall, how she'd gone to the best private school in Toowoomba and taken an arts degrees at Queensland University.

Timothy Potsmith introduced the woman as Peta Wentworth (which I also knew). She said "nice to meet you Mr Bloom," then asked if I was a travelling man. I told her what I'd told him, which prompted a change in attitude. She asked what magazine. I said I couldn't say.

"Well," she said, indicating the paintings with a delicate hand, "I hope you like the work."

I said I did very much, then quickly added that I'd better finish my notes and be off.

"Mustn't keep you then," Peta Wentworth said.

They disappeared through the inner door, leaving me to my notes. As I was writing the outside door opened and a nattily dressed man entered, nodded to me and began a slow amble round the room, critically gazing at each painting in turn, cocking his head this way and that, muttering to himself as he did. I pretended to

write but, really, I was watching him. It amused me, the way he strolled around the room as if inspecting thoroughbred horses.

He turned to me, caught me looking at him, said, “What do you think?” in a clipped accent I couldn’t quite place.

I told him about the light from the frosted glass window and how, as it changed, so did the surfaces of the paintings. He seemed impressed by that.

Just then Timothy Potsmith returned. He said he’d overheard my comments, and that he’d never thought of the paintings that way. I said I was pleased to be of some use, that it was all John Cage’s fault. They both laughed at that. Timothy Potsmith introduced me to the natty man, who’s name was Ivor Starksky, then the two went over to one corner and began a brief whispered exchange, after which they shook hands. The natty man left, saluting me as he passed (I was touched by that) and Timothy Potsmith winked at me, went over to one of the paintings and put a red sticker beside it.

“Well done,” I said as I rose from my seat and walked out into the sun.

7

Thick white clouds pushed along by a gathering nor'easter drifted overhead. I'd been on the road since dawn. My feet hurt. The footpath was hot. My heavy boots sank into succulating black tar. Heat rose from hard surfaces, blasted out from the radiators and exhausts of passing vehicles. Sweat poured from my brow. My whole body ached. I wondered if I could keep going.

At the Normanby Pub the smell of last night's stale beer wafted out of the open door. A tattooed man in blue singlet, tatty shorts and rubber thongs approached, muttered 'g'day' as he neared, then turned in front of me and went in through the open door to the public bar. Early starter! I stopped and peered in. It was as dark as a cave in there, like a private world you needed some sort of passport to enter. I hardly ever went into pubs, not at this hour, but I was thirsty. A drink and a sit down would be good. One quick one for the road! I plucked up courage and went in.

It was cool inside, the light soft. I grabbed a bar stood, sat down and ordered a beer, which was delivered wordlessly by the barman who immediately went back to his racing guide. Television screens flickered on the walls: horse and dog races, football games. There were only two other drinkers at the bar, the blue singleted man who'd entered before me and a huge tattooed man in a tank top. Islander. Fijian, Samoan… I never could tell. Not the sort you'd want trouble with. Both sat hunched, saying nothing, plenty of space between them, me in the middle. They checked me out briefly then resumed their separate, silent drinking. Neither seemed very old. Shift workers maybe, just come off shift or about to go on. The blue singlet was a typical old Aussie: thin, almost gaunt, an Anzac out of time. I took a sip, looked round.

Blue singlet stubbed a fag, turned to me, said, "How's it goin mate?"

I said I was fine, that it was good to get out of the heat.

"Yeah, too bloody hot, that's for sure."

He turned back to his beer, took a sip, thought for a moment, turned back to me, said, "Whatcha up to?"

I said I was looking for the Brisbane Line. Soon as I said that I regretted it. It just came out like a bad joke.

"The only Brisbane line I know mate," Anzac said from the corner of his roll-your-own mouth, and with no hint of curiosity, 'was the bloody white line they used to have down the footpath in Queen Street. S'posed to keep to the left you was. No one did."

Anzac was older than I thought if he remembered that.

He slid his stool closer, "Waddaya mean anyway, looking for the Brisbane line?"

Before I could answer the barman brought over a dish full of peanuts and put it on the bar between the Anzac and me. "On the house," he said in an accent I couldn't place but which might have been Balkan.

The Anzac looked at the peanuts, then at me. "Guy walks into the bar," he says without preamble, "orders a beer. He's sittin there sipping his drink when he hears these voices. Quiet like. At first he doesn't quite hear what they're sayin but after a while he realises they're talking about him. They're sayin nice things, like 'great body hasn't he. Nice hair too'. The guy looks around but there's only him and the barman and the barman's sayin nothing. Guy's perplexed. Calls the barman over, says, 'hey man, I keep hearin these voices and they're sayin nice things about me.' Barman wanders over, says, 'Oh, it's just the peanuts; they're complimentary.'"

I dutifully laugh. So does the Islander. The barman doesn't move.

"Pretty good huh," said the Anzac.

Islander moved closer, said, "That's an old one mate. But you told it OK. Mind if I pinch a peanut?"

The Anzac shrugged.

The islander took a fistful of nuts and shoved them into his huge mouth. When he'd finished chewing he downed a full schooner, wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, burped, said, "Name's Fred."

"Where the fuck you drag up a name like Fred," asked the Anzac.

I had to admit the name didn't really fit. Fred was huge.

"Dunno," answered Fred. "Anyway, you got a problem with it?"

"Nope," said the Anzac. "Anyway, my name's Roger. Pleased to meet you."

Roger stuck out his hand and Fred stuck out his and they shook.

"You play?" asked Roger, indicating Fred's Wallabies jersey.

"Used to," Fred mumbled.

"Front row?" asked Roger.

"Nah. Wing."

"Fuck! You winger. Biggest fuckin winger I ever saw."

"Wasn't so big then," offered Fred.

"Anyway," said Roger, turning to me, "what's your moniker mate?"

"Traverse," I said. "Will Traverse."

"Will Traverse," repeated Fred. "That's a good one. Anyway, here's to you Will"'

And we all shook hands.

After a brief silence, during which Fred had ordered and half drunk another schooner, Roger said, "You look like you've been on some kind of bush walk Will."

I explained that I had walked down from the hills and that I was on my way to the bay.

"Bloody long walk," said Fred. "What's it for?"

"Will says it's the Brisbane Line," offered Roger.

"What the fuck's that?" asked Fred.

I thought briefly about explaining the history of the Brisbane Line and how what I was doing was my own private version of it> Instead told them it was a kind of journey, like being a Flaneur…

"A Flannel? What the fuck's a Flannel?" Fred wanted to know.

"Someone who walks through cities," I replied. "Meeting people along the way. Like me meeting you two."

"You takin the piss?" Asked Roger.

I said I wasn't. Really.

"Sounds strange," said Fred, skolling the rest of his beer.

"Met anyone interestin?" Asked Roger.

I said I had.

"Anyway," continued Roger, "What's this Brisbane Line?"

"It's what started the State of Origin series," I lied.

"Fuck off," shouted Roger. "You really are bullshittin now."

"Flannels and Brisbane Lines," put in Fred. Sounds like bullshit to me. Sounds like you're havin us on mate."

He looked dangerous. I imagined him bearing down on me on the rugby field. It wasn't a reassuring thought. I'd gotten myself into a situation.

Roger laughed.

"You two wanna play Peanuts?" He asked, maybe in an attempt to diffuse the situation.

"Racing Peanuts!" Fred exclaimed. "Great. Yeah, let's."

Roger turned to me, said, "You in mate?"

I said that I was just passing through but that they could go ahead.

"It's important I keep moving," I added.

"Nah," the Islander insisted, "Nothin's that important. You kin stay for a coupla races. Loser shouts."

The way he looked at me I guessed I had no option.

"What's Racing Peanuts anyway?" I asked.

"It's game," said the Islander. "Here, I'll show ya."

He called the barman over, said, "Three schooners Igor."

Igor tore himself away from his (horse) racing guide and brought over three full schooners.

"Righto Will," said Fred. "Watch. A demo."

He dropped a peanut into his glass. It floated on top for a moment then slowly sank to the bottom and sat there at the bottom of the glass. I thought that must be it; that whoever's peanut settled last lost.

"Pretty simple," I said.

"No wait. Look."

The peanut had begun to rise. It gathered speed as it went and hit the top with a little bob and settled.

"See!"

I nodded.

"You ready?"

I said I was.

"Better get a fresh glass," said Fred, calling Igor over.

Fred skolled his old glass and we lined our fresh ones up in front of us.

"Wait a bit till the froth settles," suggested Roger.

We waited. The froth settled.

"Give us the nod willya Igor," Roger ordered the barman.

The barman stood before us. We each grabbed a peanut and held it over our full glasses, waiting starters orders.

Igor said 'go' and we dropped our nuts. Mine just sat there. Roger's went down straight away, followed soon after by Fred's. Their peanuts reached the bottom while mine stayed resolutely floating on the foam. That was that, I thought. Their peanuts would be back to the finish before my even began its descent. But both their peanuts sat on the bottom of the glass. Then mine started to sink. It went down pretty fast, hit the bottom and started straight up, just as the others started their journey to the surface. It was a close finish but mine came in first, to cheers all round. Fred's came last. He shrugged, skolled his beer and ordered another round.

I couldn't understand how one man, even some as big as Fred, could drink so much so quickly and still appear sober. Even skinny Roger had downed twice as many beers as I had. I was in rough company. I needed to get out. But how?

We played on. I lost the next two rounds, a considerable amount of my spare cash and a few brain cells. Roger wanted another round but I said I really had to go. Fred, a bit worse for wear by this time, said he needed a piss. I took the opportunity of his absence and walked out into the heat of the street, having lost valuable time on a stupid bar game of Racing Peanuts.

At the five-ways where Countess Street, College Road, Kelvin Grove Road, Musgrave Road and Petrie Terrace merged I stood in an alcoholic haze, gazed across the busy road, wondering if I'd ever find my way across. This was not a pedestrian friendly place. When things were difficult my mother would say, 'I'm at the end of my tether', which was exactly how I felt there at the edge of the city proper. Beyond the busy roads and the railway lines that ran multiplying into Roma Street Station the city's towers shimmered in the midday heat.

I stood at the kerb waiting for the lights to change, traffic passing in an unending stream, wondering if I, a mere pedestrian in this fast moving world, would ever be given a green light. In a beery haze I wondered vaguely at how it had all happened; how, in just a few generations a city of such size could have sprung from bushland and swamp; from a land once traversed by the narrow pathways of a people who had no need for concrete and steel. But what intrigued me most were not the visible towers or railway lines or roads or power lines, but the hidden things that made the city work. Beneath the surface world of the city was a hidden network of pipes and lines and cables, an enormous grid forever expanding, forever changing, with no beginning and no end; a grid that reached out far beyond this city's borders into global links, through trade and electronics, to distant lands. What I saw before me was just one more city locked into an empire no one understood, or controlled; a city on the rise, spreading it tendrils out. How big, I wondered, could it get.

Beneath this city, way below the Pynchonesque networks of modern times, were other, older networks; pathways from a past that was both simpler and more mysterious than those we had put down (and were continuing to put down). Below the surface lay a trapped and hidden history that might never reveal itself. The bora rings I'd come from only that morning (was it only that same morning?) had hinted at this history, but there were many other pathways and sacred sites buried beneath the undulating terrain that was the city.

There I was at that great intersection, like a tiny figures in a Geoffrey Smart painting; a lone man facing an unforgiving world of concrete, bitumen and steel; a

person full of trepidation about what he was doing; waiting for the green ‘walk’ light to flash.

Petrie Terrace was once punk central. It was on this very street that The Saints - Chris Bailey, Ed Kuepper and Ivor Hay - played their first concerts as ‘The ’76 Club’ in Hay’s house, just up the road from where I stood. One of the world’s first punk bands (Bob Geldorf claimed there were three bands that altered the face of rock music in the ‘70s: The Sex Pistols, The Ramones and The Saints), they emerged out of the 1950s Brisbane grunge scene that, in turn, rose out of places like the burger joint opposite the old Petrie Terrace Barracks.

I remember that burger joint; it was one of the few places open after midnight, apart from the dingy strip clubs in The Valley. Saturday nights the road outside would be lined with FJ Holdens, Austin A 40s, Morris Minors and Ford V8s. Rock’n roll George’s FX, with its foxtail aerial, was usually parked right outside. People would come and go; all sorts: Greeks and Italians from West End, Anglos from Wooloowin, black kids from Inala, Bodgies and Widgies from Wynnum, lined up for milk shakes and late night snacks as the juke box played 50s rock n’ roll.

The local punk movement rose out of a peculiar Brisbane aesthetic, finding roots in shabby urban settings like Spring Hill and West End and in poorer suburbs like Wynnum and Inala. There was a political element to the rock scene in inner Brisbane, one that that stood counter to the conservatism of the rest of Queensland. This conflict, between city progressives on the one hand and rural and suburban conservatives on the other, began immediately after the Second World War when Brisbane, formally a big country town with strong ties to the hinterland, began to emerge into a city in its own right.

In post-war Brisbane reminders of the American presence were everywhere; from ex-Army trucks trundling through the streets in civilian duties to the wrecks of tanks and armoured cars littering the wastelands of Boondall to the Dacotas in the front yards of suburban houses. One million or more foreign troops passing through a city of three hundred thousand people does leave an impression.

Across the road from where I stood I could see the railway yards and platforms from which troop trains left for the long journey north to Townsville and other stations of the Pacific War. I was too young to remember anything but fragments of the last days of the war but I do remember the trains and I do remember the ex-Army ordnance and the aeroplanes in people's back yards. The city my generation grew into suffered the after-effects of what had amounted to an invasion. It took a long time for the city to recover and to find its feet. In the mean time there was a craving for the old security of Empire (now defunct) but the world had changed. Standing up for God Save the Queen at the cinema began to seem absurd, as did the dictates of parents whose mores were as outdated as the Empire that failed to save us.

By the time I was a teenager there was much to rebel against. My father was a socialist but also a disciplinarian with a hatred of privilege. My mother was a royalist with silly notions about 'the old country' and what was 'proper'. The teachers at high school reflected old values and old methods. I joined the Wooloowin gang. Like other teenage gangs of inner Brisbane we wore duffle coats, pegged pants and desert boots. We weren't sure what we were rebelling against.

By the sixties bodgies and rockers had given over to sharpies and surfers and the rebel spirit had shifted from reaction to post-war conservatism to political action but the old grunge elements remained, finding outlet in 1970s punk.

These thoughts raced through my mind as I stood there waiting to cross. Then the lights changed and I walked on, over the bridge above the railway lines and on to College Road and Gregory Terrace. From the high ridge just past Brisbane Girl's Grammar, I stood looked out over Victoria Park, that long swath of green that forms a natural border between the inner city and the northern suburbs. In colonial times the place was called Yorks Hollow after a tribe the newly arrived English officials called the Duke of York clan (a presumption of ownership and a patronising one at that). Before the Europeans came it was Wallan, an important ceremonial ground of the old people.

I looked down on that great hollow that might, in ancient times, have been the former course of the river, curving round from near the William Jolly Bridge,

through the exhibition grounds to somewhere near Newstead. Leaving the remnant the waterholes of Yorks Hollow.

I made my way down into the water holes. An old black man with white hair stood leaning on the railings of a bridge over one of the connecting waterways. He wore shabby clothes and no shoes. He looked ancient, more relic than human. I thought of going to him and asking him what he thought about the place but I held back. Instead I stood, like him, gazing out over the reedy waters. We were there a long time, the two of us, staring into the water. What was he thinking? What was I thinking?

A white egret jabbed at the water. An ibis strutted about the banks. Swallows darted and a kingfisher flashed. Black ducks swam towards us, did a three sixty degree turn or two and, sussing that we had nothing to offer, paddled away. Still we stayed, the two of us, alone in the hollow, the muted roar of traffic along Gillcrest Avenue and the distant hum of the city the only sounds. Until the quiet was shattered by the diesel roar of a freight train working its way along the rails along the southern border of the hollow. The train passed. Quiet returned. Still the old men stayed.

I left the old man and walked away, going across the lawns to the empty playing fields where I once played hockey.

It's a Friday afternoon in September 1953. I'm walking away from the playing fields, hockey stick in one hand, school bag slung over one shoulder, another game lost, echoes of 'see ya Will' echoing off the walls of the Royal Brisbane Hospital where I was born. I'm crossing Bowen Bridge Road and heading towards the city, the Ekka showgrounds below and to my left, eerily deserted except for one lone Ferris left over from the last show. I'm trudging on over the railway lines to the great cast iron gates of the museum building that always remind me of pictures in magazines of the ornate structures the British Raj. I'm going through the gates into the grounds, heading for the huge black German tank from the First World War I think is like an enormous metal cockroach. I'm opening the black steel door and clambering inside, sitting in the driver's seat, pinpoints of light

streaming through jagged shell holes. I'm peering out through the driver's visor, seeing not a battlefield but people leisurely wandering the museum gardens. I sit, as I do each time, imagining things. I'm climbing down, going into the museum building, wandering past rows of glass-toped cases full of rocks and minerals and stuffed birds and animals that stare blankly back at me, wandering on past tall wall cases full of Aboriginal bones arranged like souvenirs that give me the creeps. I'm the only one there in that vast domed place quiet as death...

8

Fancy lettering set in stained glass reads:

Empire Hotel

Public Bar

There's always an odd disparity between the ornate Victorian exteriors of the old inner city pubs and their sordid interiors full of stinking beer-bellied men inside fronting up to bars of finely polished wood with gold-plated beer taps. Days before poker machines: smell of beer and cigarettes and stale human sweat.

I look at my watch. Three O'clock. Billy Drahaam would be in there with his mates At least he said he would. Gathering my resolve, and overcoming last minute doubts, I push the door open and step in.

"Hello! It's the Wandering Jew himself."

It's Billy Drahaam, at the bar with Gary Lee, Colin Clark and a couple of blokes I don't know, already half-sloshed by the look of it, holding up a half-empty glass of sparkling ale.

"Sorry I'm late," I meekly offered.

"Better late than never Will. Come on in."

"This," Billy Drahaam announced, indicating a person I didn't know, "is Zac Myers, Labor lawyer and advocate for the downtrodden and dispossessed."

I took Zac's large proffered hand. Crunch of bone. He looked like someone who'd once played serious rugby.

"And this," Billy Drahaam continued, indicating a tall gangly man with receding grey hair and scruffy beard, "is Roger McQuinn, History Department, Queensland Uni."

Another handshake, this time softer. Roger looked like someone who'd done a lot of late night study.

"And these trouble makers," continued Billy Drahaam, indicating Colin Clark and Gary Lee, "you know."

"Good to see you," said Colin Clark. "How's it going?"

"Bloody hot out there! I need a drink."

"And so you shall have one," said Gary Lee, summoning a schooner. "Bill has been telling us about your walk. Bit unusual isn't it? What's it all about?"

I was suddenly annoyed. I'd expected to meet Bill for a quick drink, not get caught up with a bunch of drunks asking awkward questions. I was also concerned about how cold it was in the pub after the humid heat of outside. The cold seeped into my bones.

"Stupid the way they overdo the air conditioning, give anyone a cold," I said by way of a reply.

Zac Myers downed a mouthful. "Bill says you're calling it The Brisbane Line. Interesting! I'd forgotten all about that business til Bill told us what you were up to."

I gave Billy Drahaam what I thought was a sufficiently withering look. He shrugged.

"Bill says you were at the old bora ground," offered Roger McQuinn. "Know the place well. My uni is doing some research there. Anthropology. Not my field but… Bill couldn't explain what the bora ground had to do with this walk you're on. Or the Brisbane Line for that matter. I'm intrigued."

The last thing I wanted was to get involved in a discussion about something I couldn't even explain to myself, but Roger McQuinn was looking at me as if waiting for an explanation.

"It's performance art, " I offered. "kind of."

"In the school of land journeys," offered Gary Lee. "Richard Longand the like…"

"Who's bloody Richard Long," asked Zac Myers.

"English bloke," offered Gary Lee. "Did these long walks. Made them into art works."

"Sounds like bullshit to me," offered Colin Clark.

"To each his own," suggested Roger McGuinn.

There ensued a debate on the role of contemporary art, during which we all displayed our complete ignorance. I got annoyed, said they were all on the wrong track.

"And what track," Roger McGuinn wondered aloud, "are you on Will?"

"That's very funny Roger," said Billy Drahaam.

Roger looked at Bill. They all looked at Bill. No one expected jokes from Bill. Bill downed a good swill of beer.

"Well,' insisted Roger, looking to me.

I told them what I'd told the policewoman; that I was being a flaneur. Gary lee said what the fuck's a flaneur and I said I didn't really know but that I thought it was someone who was interested in cities and how they worked and everyone went quiet.

"A flaneur is…"

"Shit Colin," interrupted Zac, "Who gives a fuck. I want to know what this walk's about."

Zac looked at me. I looked at the others. They were looking at me expectantly. That was the trouble with me; I'd start things without really knowing where they'd take me, or what I was really trying to do. Sometimes this payed off, other times it didn't. I wished I'd kept going, that I hadn't stopped into this bloody pub.

"Leave him alone," put in Gary Lee (next to Billy Drahaam my oldest friend, and the one who was usually the most understanding at difficult times) "He's on a mission. We don't have to understand everything."

"Maybe not," suggested Roger McGuinn, "but maybe an outline would be good. So that we can pass on the great event to our children."

"To future generations," added Zac Myers in a kind of salute. "Who will inherit the earth."

"Shut up Zac," cried Colin Clark, "Will was about to fill us in. Weren't you Will."

I wasn't sure I was about to fill them in, but I'd had enough. I went into a long rave about how I'd decided to walk between three sites of historical

significance that just happened to be on a straight line across the city and that that the only historical line I could think of relating to the city's history was the Brisbane Line and that it seemed oddly appropriate to what I was doing…

"Bit political isn't it," interrupted Zac Myers. "The bora bit I mean. Minefield of Indigenous politics there old chap. Mixing Indigenous sites with European ones!"

"There's more than one Brisbane Line," interrupted Roger McQuinn. "Right at the start of this colony the authorities declared a fifty mile exclusion zone around the settlement, into which free settlers weren't allowed. That was the first Brisbane Line. Protecting a jail!"

This comment elicited another silence. Which Gary Lee broke by asking why I'd chosen the sites I had. Despite the air conditioning I began to sweat. I tried to explain that it was difficult to explain, got tangled up the way I used to when trying to explain difficult things to my parents. I was mumbling.

"He's trying to understand what the hell it means to be a Brisbaner," put in Billy Drahaam, sensing my difficulty.

"Brisbaner!" shouted, Colin Clark. "What kind of word is that?"

"It's what we are," I said meekly. "We're not New Yorkers or Londoners or Berliners. We are Brisbaners."

"Brisbaners????!"

A shouting grinning figure stepped in through the front door.

"This," explained Billy Drahaam, indicating the approaching figure, "is Kelly Milton, raconteur and former Melbournian."

Kelly Milton swallowed a good mouthful of beer handed to him by Gary Lee, wiped the froth from his mouth with the back of his hand. "Doesn't have a good ring: Brisbaner! Bris-bane–er… Bris, the bree the diddle diddle dee…Bane oh, bane of my life, er!?"

"Anyway," he asked, "what is all this Brisbaner stuff?"

"The Brisbane Line," put in Roger McGuinn.

"And bora rings," added Billy Drahaam.

"What the fuck!" exclaimed Kelly Milton, obviously flummoxed.

"Will is walking the Brisbane Line," explained Gary Lee.

"Brisbane Line…" exclaimed Kelly Milton, looked around for an explanation.

"A defence line," obliged Roger McGuinn. "To keep out the Japs. 1942. Proposal by the Joint Chiefs of Staff to the Menzies government. There were fuck-all forces left in the country. All operational elsewhere. Not enough to stop the Japs. In fright our political and military leaders drew a Line, below which the mighty white race would gather to defend the habitable and temperate southeast corner of the country from the despicable yellow hoards. Drew a line from just north of Brisbane to around Adelaide. Thus they'd keep their Europe in the southeast. The north and west, that vast and difficult un-European country beyond the line, would be torched, leaving only black stumps and dead animals…"

"Fence posts and wire, Dead trees, the bare earth!"

"What the fuck's that supposed to be Gary," asked Colin Clark.

"A poem, Colin. Not that you'd know."

"All single syllable words," put in Zac Myers. Or near enough. Clever Gary."

Gary shrugged.

"But then Macarthur came," continued Roger McGuinn the college lecturer, "and the threat of invasion receded and atom bombs were dropped on Japanese cities and it was all over and our men returned from the prison camps of Asia and the Middle East and got on with their lives. At least some did. The war was a turning point, especially for this city. Afterwards people's loyalties began to change. England was no longer 'the old country' for many."

"Might have been close though," offered Colin Clark. "We might have been Japanese."

I could see that Gary Lee was a bit upset. His people were Chinese and I knew that he harboured resentment towards the Japanese who, he'd told me more than once over the years, had invaded his ancestral home. And then there was Billy Drahaam, whose German parents had been interred during the war.

But Roger the academic was on a hobbyhorse and wouldn't be put off.

"And," he continued before anyone, including Kelly Milton, could get a word in, "the people who had believed implicitly in the power and everlasting might of their British heritage, began to see that all that had held to be incontestable, that we were forever British, might in fact be a mirage. For some, especially those on the Right, Bill (here he glared at Billy Drahaam who I never thought of as right wing at all), this was uncomfortable. In our hour of need Britain could not save us. The Yanks did, and they brought with them new ideas; ideas some didn't like."

"Here," said Billy Drahaam, handing round another round, "endeth the first lesson."

"Give him a go," piped up Kelly Milton, froth about the mouth, "maybe it is time someone explained the paranoia of this great big cockroach infested country town. Carry on MacBeth."

Roger, thirst quenched by another long swill, resumed.

"Wasn't just Brisbane, Kelly! The point is that some people began to realise that they were part of a wider world, more part of Asia than Europe. England was in decline and Europe was a mess. It was the Yanks who saved us, not Churchill…"

"It was an invasion," put in Gary Lee, who'd been quiet, "too many Americans with too much money."

"Over here, over paid and over sexed," put in Colin Clark. "I wonder how many of us had American fathers, truth be known. I suspect my own mother, bless her soul. Used to get a certain look about her when America was mentioned."

Colin Clark looked sheepishly at the others, who were all suddenly quiet, then washed his mouth out with a good swill.

I wondered if there was some hidden message in what he'd just said. I remembered a time when I'd gone with my mother on the trolley bus to the Botanical Gardens and how she'd met a man there who had an American accent. They'd sat close together on a bench looking out over the river while I played nearby. I was a child, maybe five, but even so I could sense something going on there, something I didn't like. I was just a child and soon forgot about the occasion,

until, years later, a man called in to our house one morning. It was him: the man she'd met in the gardens. It was a weekday, school holidays, my father at work. I was in the dining room, drawing. They were in the kitchen, sipping tea and talking in soft voices. I'd been told by a friend that there were what he called GI love children. I began to wonder what the real story was at the Gardens by the river and whether I might be a GI child.

"There's the story," resumed Kelly Milton, "of the pretty young Aussie girl who says to the GI, 'show me your teeth'. He opens his mouth and she reaches out and tries to yank them out and is surprised when nothing gives. 'Oh, they're real', she says, surprised."

"How could the Diggers compete, with their lousy wages and their mouth's full of false or rotten teeth," asked Gary Lee.

"Bit of an exaggeration there Gary," suggested Roger McGuinn. "But it was a turning point for this town; all those GIs with chewing gum in their mouths and bucks in their pockets. The wide world! But when the droning of the last battle weary American warplane faded out of Eagle Farm and the whistles of the last troop trains petered out and the last warship's horn faded into Moreton Bay, we were left alone. Scared shitless, truth be known. Leaving only a bitter realisation that we were bit players on a world stage that was more complex than we had ever begun to imagine. And the men who survived the Western Desert, Singapore and Kakoda, and all the other theatres of war, returned cynical and bitter to women who had betrayed them to American soldiers who had simply gone home, via the Pacific theatre, to small town America. And the city was never the same. The images that played on the people's minds were not of marching men in uniforms or absurd and fanciful notions of royal families and the finery of empire, but drunks leaning to bitter futures out of pub doors and deros in the streets and, on the South Side beyond the fish markets and brothels and dirty black men no one would dared go near."

"The only Brisbane Line I know," said Billy Drahaam, "is the State of Origin try line."

"Bravo!" Kelly Milton promptly proposed three hearty cheer for the maroons. It was meant to be ironic, coming as it did from a Melbournian, but we all joined in.

"To Queensland, and death to the Cockroaches," we shouted in unison.

Which term (cockroaches that is) had to be explained to the Victorian.

"Politics and sport," said Kelly Milton, "have a lot to answer for."

Gary Lee rolled his eyes, held up his hand – a stop sign - said loudly, "Anyway, that's all ancient history! All that paranoia about the Jap peril and reds under the beds; all crap. All that worry about being overtaken by the yellow hordes. The White Australia Policy. Preserving Australia for the pale skins and their ugly beer bellies and their cancerous bodies… There are some who still believe in all that."

Gary (ne Chong) was going for it. Unwinding like I'd never seen before. Everyone went quiet.

"Take a look out there in the streets you blokes," he continued, indicating the front door. "China Town. Hardly see an Anglo Irish face out there! No silly Catholic versus Protestant battles in that street. And the better we are for it too. Those people couldn't care less about your Brisbane Line. They're looking to the future. Which aint yours, chaps."

"Speaking of the Brisbane Line," Zac offered up after a long and uncomfortable pause during which not a drop was drunk, "I was digging in the back yard the other day when I struck something hard. Turned out it was part of an air-raid shelter. My father remembered digging it in '41. Or was it '42. There it was, this utterly foreign thing in the corner of the yard. It's like you said Will, there are things hidden, and you never know when they might surface. Or, if they do, whether we will pay them any heed. Anyway, there I was staring down into this dark hole…"

"There was this bloke," I said, recalling one of my father's more obscure jokes, "who spent all his spare time digging holes. As soon as he'd finished one he'd fill it in and start again. His neighbour was intrigued, spent a good part of his spare time watching the holes being dug. Over the years the holes got bigger and

better. Were talking quality holes here. The neighbour became an appreciative and perceptive critic. One day the digger finishes the best and most perfect hole the neighbour had ever seen. The neighbour also knew that, come next day, the hole would be filled in and another started. So he approached the artistic digger with an offer to buy the hole. The artist, who was more interested in digging holes than hoarding them, agreed that his neighbour could have the hole as long as he arranged for its removal. It was a big hole but the distance between the properties was not great so they agreed on a deal: the neighbour would pay for all expenses relating to the removal. After getting several quotes and some expert opinion, the critical neighbour booked a local cartage firm specialising in earth removal. It was an old firm run by a Dad and Dave type couple going by the names of Ern and Fred. They still used the original truck, an old lend-lease Ford blitz fitted with a drop-side tray. They duly arrived early the next morning for the job. After much fussing and a lot of unnecessary swearing they manage to get the hole onto the truck. Ern was in the drivers seat. Fred was directing operations. The neighbour, anxiously watching the operation, began waving his hands as if directing proceedings. They secured their load and Fred yelled Go. But Ern took off too quickly (it was more to do with the crook clutch than with any excess of power the old truck might have had) and the hole fell off. Fred and the neighbour yelled for Ern to stop. Fred and the neighbour jumped onto the back of the empty truck and yelled for Bert to Back up. The whole thing was all too much for poor old Ern, who got into a panic with the clutch and the brake and the truck lurched back too fast. That was the last anyone heard of them or the truck…"

Kelly Milton gave a little chuckle, the rest just looked at me blankly.

"One of my father's stories," I lamely offered.

"This bloke," piped up Kelly Milton, "walks into a pub, goes up to the barman and orders a beer. He's sitting there sipping a cold one when he hears voices. Looks around but there's no one there except the barman, who's down the other end of the bar polishing glasses. The voices are saying these nice things about the bloke, things like 'what lovely hair he has' and 'check out the biceps' and 'great nose...know what they say about big noses...' Well the bloke's baffled. The voices are clear, no

mistake, and obviously directed at him. After a while he calls the barman over, says 'I must be going potty, I keep hearing these voices saying all these great things about me but there's no one here except you'. 'Ah', says the barman, 'don't mind them. It's the peanuts. They're complimentary.'"

Which brought on another round of silence.

"Better be off," said Zac Myers before Roger could pursue his line of argument, "pre-season do on at Ballymore. Any of you blokes going?"

"Ballymore," queried Kelly Milton, "isn't that a rugby ground? Never could understand that game."

"No, you wouldn't," answered Billy Drahaam, "you and your silly Melbourne game you presume to call Aussie Rules. No Rules more like it!"

"Aerial ping-pong," put in Colin Clark.

"It's a great game, Aussie Rules," offered Zac Myers the rugby tragic. "Very Australian. You take a huge paddock of no set size but roughly oval, select every able-bodied youth from the district, give them a ball and tell them to boot it through a couple of sticks. Forget strategy. Forget rules. Just kick it. And if you can't get it through the main post there's always a couple of smaller posts for a consolation prize."

Without waiting for a response to his broadside Zac downed his dregs and turned for the door and his appointment at Ballymore.

"Better be off too," I said, downing the dregs of my by now stale beer.

Bill and Roger followed me out into the heat and humidity of Brunswick Street, leaving Gary, Kelly and Colin at the bar.

"Where you off to now Will" asked Roger.

"He's going to Centenary Place," said Billy Drahaam. "Intends to stay the night there."

"What!" exclaimed Roger McGuinn. "You mad or what?"

"Actually, it's the old Cathedral he's really interested in," offered Billy Drahaam.

Roger began what would have been a long diatribe concerning the cathedral and its history but I cut him off, saying I knew all that and, anyway, I had to get there before dark.

"Before you go Will," he said, grabbing my arm, "let me show you something."

Roger set off down Brunswick Street towards New Farm.

"It's the wrong direction," I lamented.

"Won't take long," he insisted.

I set off after Roger, Billy Drahaam trailing along behind, protesting about the heat and muttered about mad people. We must have looked a strange trio indeed, loping down Brunswick Street half sloshed; Roger McGuinn in his corduroy uni outfit, including sandals with socks, Billy Drahaam in short-sleeves and baggy pants and me in my walking gear, looking like a tramp. Not that anyone would take much notice in that street of crazy people.

"Sometimes," Roger McGuinn observed as we passed a skinny man stoned out of his mind, "I think there are more crazy people in Brisbane than any other city."

"And a good many of them are in this street," muttered Billy Drahaam.

As if in confirmation a tall stooping bum came veering drunkenly towards us, glazed look about the eyes, bringing with him that desperate smell of the dispossessed.

"Eastern European," commented McGuinn, "carrying with him memories of god knows what past horrors…"

The derro passed by mumbling incoherently. A disfigured black man came swearing loudly up the footpath, abusing no one in particular. He saw us, uttered a loud oath, spat. "Fucken fucker fuck cunts," he screamed as we walked on in embarrassed silence. Across the next intersection a skinny woman walked sideways towards the gutter, bent to pick up a fag end, saw us, uttered even more savage oaths before staggering on.

"High as a kite," muttered sweating Billy Drahaam.

"Good old Brunswick Street," said McGuinn as he pulled up by a solid iron gate between two equally solid stone gateposts.

"That," he said, pointing through the heavy iron gates to a dilapidated mansion at the end of a wide gravel drive, "is Wynberg. Duhig's old home. Catholic Archbishop of Brisbane, builder of stone monuments. Schools, monasteries, seminaries, churches, hospitals…"

"And a monument to the Church on every available hilltop," I offered before Roger could finish.

"The same man who was responsible for the disaster that was the Cathedral of the Holy Name," Roger added.

"Remember James Callahan, Will," Billy Drahaam put in out of the blue, "and his poor mother. Used to make me mad going round there, seeing the bloody poverty, and all those kids, and his old man pissed as a fart, abusing everyone. Remember that time we went there for cards under-the-house and he came in drunk as a skunk and started abusing James, only James gets up from the card table and says, calm as can be, 'piss off dad. Go to bed.' The old man sets to wallop James but doesn't, seeing all of us kids there and James taller than him. We never went back there after that. Ever hear from James, Will?"

I hadn't. But I remembered one night at James' place going upstairs for a piss and walking into a room full of religious icons. Pictures of Mother Mary and bleeding Jesus all round the walls. It was the first hard-core Irish Catholic household I'd been in and it felt strange. I was reminded of my father's disparagement of religion and the hold it had on people. The only picture of a real person in that house, apart from some small family photos, was a large portrait of Archbishop Duhig. Jame's mother was there, looking gaunt and hard-worn. I didn't think too much of it then but a guessed later that she'd been beaten quite a bit.

"My father," I said, "never had a good word for Duhig. Of course dad was Labor Left. Never forgave Duhig for The Split."

Roger murmured assent. "Did you know that Duhig had a room at Wynburg he called the Gold Room. It was a transplanted piece of Roman Baroque. Nothing like it seen in Brisbane before. Got all the furniture from some unfortunate bloke in Rome who went broke. Brought all this stuff back here to his private salon. Included a massive throne-like chair he'd squeeze his fat frame into. Addressed his

private audiences from it, surrounded by gilt and high art. Did you know that he supported Mussolini? Met him during one of his visits to the Holy City. Spoke out for Germans here, especially after the first war. Didn't agree with the peace agreement signed in Paris in 1919. Saw that as just the postponing of hostilities. Accused the powerful nations of using their power of arms to take away the rights of weaker nations. He supported the Germans in Brisbane against the state. Had a photo of Mussolini in his study given to him personally by the Duce, but as soon as MacArthur came to Brisbane he replaced that photo with one of the general. Apparently they got on well, he and MacArthur. Duhig had an old map of the Pacific that he gave to MacArthur. Apparently MacArthur actually used it. Good maps of the Pacific were hard to come by then…"

I looked over at Billy Drahaam. He was leaning on the fence looking as bored as I was. I realised, as Roger rabbited on, that what I was doing wasn't history, at least not the sort Roger dealt with. Roger was reeling off facts, things he'd learnt second hand from books and lectures. There was enthusiasm in what he presented, maybe even passion of sorts, but it didn't seem real, didn't seem truly felt. His experience was a far cry from Edna's, or Arthur's.

I interrupted Roger mid sentence, said I had to go.

"Sorry," Roger said, "bit of a passion of mine. Duhig and the Holy Name Cathedral; two of the city's forgotten relics."

I turned and was about to head off when Roger asked how I intended getting across the bay. I said I'd catch the barge from Cleveland, adding that I'd like to have stopped off at Peel Island on the way but figured that would be difficult.

"Peel Island," Roger exclaimed. "I did a bit of research on that once. Interesting place. But, hey, I could take you there Will. I've a ketch at Manly. Could get the old tub out. Need to really. Could take you to Peel on the way, then drop you at Dunwich."

"Roger's right," added Bill. "How about it. By the time you get to Cleveland we could have the boat ready. Meet you at the spit near the lighthouse. What do you think?"

I said it sounded a good idea and so we agreed.

"Terrific," enthused Roger." "We'll collect you from the spit at Cleveland. Early the day after tomorrow. Boat's white. Or was. With cream gunwales. Look out for us."

Bill and I said our farewells and turned for Centenary Place.

9

It was early evening by the time Billy Drahaam and I reached Centenary Place. With the shadows of trees lengthening across the lawns and pathways the place seemed even bleaker than normal (I'd always thought Centenary Place bleak, although I never could work out why that was). Maybe it was its location between the city proper and the shoddy buildings of The Valley. Maybe it was the derros who always seemed to hang around the toilets at the southern end of the park. It was an odd place; a small triangle of land bounded by busy roads and buffeted by a constant roar of traffic.

We sat on a wooden bench just off the path near the statue of Robert Burns (wondering vaguely what Burns would have thought of this rather grand tribute from a local Burns Society he'd probably never been aware of). I took off my great clodding boots, my stinking socks and my sweaty hat.

"Place gives me the creeps," Bill muttered. "You sure about sleeping here?"

I nodded, too exhausted even to speak. He begged me to change my mind, suggested I spend the night somewhere safe, like of the many nearby hotels. I told him I was committed to sleeping here; that it was part of the deal.

"Worse than staying the night beside the bora ring," he said. "At least there were no hoboes there."

He was right; there were no hoboes there, but there was a presence. I couldn't explain that to Bill.

"You're mad Traverse. Staying here is more than stupid. Check those blokes out," Billy Drahaam added, indicating the derros gathered at the southern end of the park near the toilets. "Wouldn't trust them far as I could throw them."

"I'll be right Bill. They'll see me as one of them."

Billy Drahaam shrugged, sat forward, head down, chin resting on his large hands. He looked tired. Perhaps he had more on his mind than his usually carefree manner suggested. This was the closest I'd seen him to melancholy; something I was prone to and not something I'd ever associated with him. He was an old friend, someone who'd stuck with me through thick and thin. I felt I owed him a lot. It

occurred to me as I sat there that you never fully 'know' someone, even those closest to you.

We sat together in the park/ as the evening sky grew dark/ it was then I felt alone/ and wished that I'd gone straight…

Bill and me: what a strange pair we were. And then there was Gary Lee: an odd trio indeed; me with my mix of Irish and English ancestry, Bill with his German parents, Gary with his Chinese parents. We were a small sample of what was becoming an increasingly complex demographic in an increasingly complex city, one that, at the time of my walk, didn't really know where it was heading. We had complex cultural and religious histories to deal with (including the never resolved tensions between my Irish Catholic father and my Anglican mother) but beyond those things lay the great Aboriginal questions; questions which, in 1981, were far from being resolved.

Billy Drahaam rose, said he guessed it was time to go, that he had to get back to the wife and kids. We shook hands. I thanked him for his support. He reminded me of my agreement to meet him and Roger at Cleveland then went away shaking his head.

After he'd gone I felt terribly alone, more so than I'd felt at the bora ground. I was also just a little frightened.

I sat in that darkening park, watching the passing parade, people on their way home from work in the city, heading for the bus stops on Ann Street. Two young female office workers gave me a wide berth. A businessman in a dark suit checked me out the way people check out derros. A couple of tradesmen took no notice as they passed. An older woman, well dressed, saw me, reached for her purse then, maybe ascertaining that I wasn't begging, moved on. Gradually the human tide thinned until there was no one. Even the homeless mob down the other end had moved off. I wasn't sure if they'd vacated the park for the night, but hoped they had. I needed the toilets!

Darkness fell. In the dim glow of a park light above my seat I wrote up my journal, then, finished, prepared myself for my night as a derro. When I was a child I'd been fascinated by derros. After the war they were all over the city. They both

frightened and fascinated me. My father once said, pointing to a derro, “There but for the grace of God my arse!”. He didn’t believe in God but I knew what he meant. I sometimes thought I’d end up a derro. Now, for one night at least, I’d be one, sleeping on a park bench with only a thin ground sheet for protection against the night, and whatever it would bring. I’d had a sleepless night by the bora ring; this night, I guessed, would be no better.

For a while everything was fine; the park bench was reasonably comfortable and no one bothering me. I found the sound of traffic oddly reassuring. But as the night wore slowly on the traffic slowed and other unidentifiable noises intruded. There were movements, too, that I found disquieting. I could not rest, gave up on any hope of sleep. Instead I lay there, my head on my backpack, the ground sheet over me, looking up through the overhanging Poinciana trees at the night sky. It was a different sky to the one at the bora ring. There the stars had shone brightly against the black sky. Here the sky was orange and the few stars I could see were hazy.

I must have fallen asleep because at one point I woke with a start to find a figure looming over me. I saw a dark face with little lights where the eyes were. I sat up and the figure disappeared. I was tired and wasn’t sure then, or now, whether that figure was real or not. The traffic noise had stopped completely. I felt absolutely alone and vulnerable. I guessed derros got used to this. Or maybe that’s why they huddled together, risking drunken fights and broken bones for company. Then, out of that utter quiet I heard them; the same group I guessed, down at the other end of the park near the toilets, quarrelling amongst themselves. I hoped they would stay there and that they would remain unaware of my presence.

10

I woke with the sun rising over All Hallows School, feeling even worse than I did the previous morning at the bora ground. I dragged myself up and wandered down the path to the toilets, thankful that the derros seemed to have gone. I undressed and washed away the sleep and the accumulated sweat and dirt of the road, dried myself as best I could, and changed into the only spare set of underclothes and socks I had. I washed the stinking undies and socks, pegged them onto my backpack (they'd dry, I hoped, as I walked) and went back to my seat.

In that early light the carefully tended flower gardens looked pleasant. Centenary Place seemed a little less sinister than it had the previous evening. Pigeons cooed and strutting at my feet, picking at scraps of food. Two well-dressed business types - early starters - walked at a brisk pace along the main path past the statue of Robert Burns.

A derro carrying a half drunk flagon came by, saw me, stretched out his hand and mumbled, "Twenty cents fer the bus mate…?"

I shook my head. He stood there looking at me, head slightly cocked and shaking from alcohol (or maybe something like Parkinson's), his befuddled brain working hard to place me. What was I: derro, backpacker, shift-worker…? Then, with a shake of his head, he turned and went shuffling down towards the toilets at the far end of the park where a couple from the previous day's mob, including two black women who'd taken to jabbering in high-pitched voices, had now gathered on the still wet grass (where the hell had they been?). I opened my journal, took out my pen, did a few quick sketches and made a few notes then drifted off to an uneasy slumber.

Out of that slumped oblivion I was rudely woken by a loud and cheery 'hello'. I looked up to find an elderly man with longish grey hair standing before me. He had on a Harris Tweed coat over long neatly-pressed trousers and, on his head, a natty little hat that had seen better days.

"Sorry," he said. "You were miles away. Gave you a start didn't I?"

I laughed weakly, said I was a bit out of it.

"That some kind of research?" he asked, indicated my journal.

He wasn't a derro, just an old man looking to pass the time. I told him I was doing a story on historic sites across the city.

"Like that one there," he said, pointing across Gotha Street to the ruins of the Cathedral of the Holy Name.

I nodded. He sat down beside me.

"Was to be have been the greatest cathedral in the southern hemisphere," he said.

I smiled to myself. That great old Aussie boast! Nothing could ever be simply 'the greatest in the world' or 'best in the world'. We had to settle for the Southern Hemisphere. It was a favourite expression of my mother's. 'The Royal Brisbane Hospital', she used to say, 'is the biggest hospital in the Southern Hemisphere'. You were supposed to be impressed by such statements, and maybe you were.

"What's so amusing," the old man wanted to know.

"Nothing," I lied.

"Anyway, names Sid. Sid Brown. Sounds like a colour doesn't it? And yours?"

I told him my name.

"This project, " he asked, indicating my journal, "what's it about?"

I told him it was about several things, including the cathedral, or what was left of it.

"It was Duhig's great failure you know," Sid continued. "Was meant to be his swan song. The crowing glory of the Catholic Church in Queensland. But it wasn't to be. It's the greatest symbol of failure we have in this city."

I wasn't sure how to deal with this. It was odd, after the lecture by Roger McGuinn I'd been thinking about Archbishop Duhig and how, despite his faults, he was one of the few 'characters' of note the city had produced. Now here was this old man who reminded me of my father and his own obsessions with the

Archbishop. According to my father Duhig was a right wing reactionary who, among other things, played a big role in splitting my father's beloved Australian Labor Party and sending it into the political wilderness. I was reminded of my father's ranting diatribes about 'The Split'. I couldn't remember details but I remembered some of the people involved; people like Archbishop Duhig and Archbishop Mannix from Melbourne and Bob Santamaria and a thing called 'The Movement', out of which came the Democratic Labor Party, which in turn led to the defeat of the Federal Labor government in 1949, and the subsequent defeat of the Queensland Labor government, from which the Party hadn't recovered. It was a time of great and absurd bitterness between party factions. When my father contested an unwinable seat for the Labor Party and lost he blamed The Split.

"A penny for your thoughts."

"Sorry Sid. You set me thinking about things."

"Like what?"

"Like how absurd the world can be. Like that cathedral and what it stood for…"

"Know much about it," he asked.

"Some. My father told me the story about the money raised to build it being sent to Rome to be blessed and how it never returned because the Vatican kept it."

"Protestant lies," Sid said with feeling. "Old wives' tale! Money just wasn't there. The Depression you know! No one had the money to donate to buildings of such huge scale. Then, after the Second War, we had reconstruction. Bad timing. Costs went up. Money was scarce. Had to accept St Stephens as the cathedral church. It's a nice church, but nothing like this one would have been…"

A pigeon waddled up to my feet. Ugly bloody thing. I kicked at it. Vermin!

"Can't help it," Sid Brown said, observing the departing pigeon and noting my sudden anger.

What was I was angry at? Something to do with my father maybe, some deep resentment I couldn't possibly fathom. Then or now.

"It was a spectacular site you know," Sid Brown continued. "Before the Story Bridge was built it would have been the first major building people saw

coming up the river. Imagine that: a building approximating St Peters of Rome here in Brisbane, overlooking the river."

I agreed that it would have been grand.

"Plan was a Latin cross," Sid continued, "surrounded by terraced lawns and gardens, with monumental flights of steps flanked by balustrades and statues and promenades for processional. The nave would have been fifty foot wide and seventy six feet high, with ambulatory aisles and chapels to the Sacred Heart and Blessed Virgin. The dome over the intersection of the nave and transepts was to be eighty feet wide and two hundred and eighty feet high. There'd be seven large chapels opening off the sanctuary and windows around the base of the dome throwing a flood of light onto the alter; the whole thing 340 foot long and 240 feet across the transept towers and the great dome 280 foot high!"

I scribbled some of the useless facts into my journal, partly to please the old man (facts weren't what I was looking for) and partly because, well, they seemed interesting.

"You know," he continued, "if it had been completed it would have changed this city's history. Duhig wanted it to be the first truly grand building designed and built in Australian materials by Australian workers. He had the old Labor sense of a fair go for the workers. That sad joke you mentioned… About the money being grabbed by the Vatican… told by non-Catholics…"

I told him my father had said that the ruins represented the failed dreams of a pompous man.

That shook Sid Brown.

"Ah, well! I can see you aren't a believer. I met him, you know. Duhig. Of course he was old then, but he was still a grand man. People on the left hated him to be sure. But he was a humanist. Not a racist like your Calwell! Even at the height of the Pacific War he was never anti-Jap. Not against the Japanese people anyway. He hated propaganda. All those horror stories of Japanese atrocities went against his religious teachings. To him all people were humans, all potential Roman Catholics. In the tin-pot town that was Brisbane those views were intolerable to some. When the real threat of invasion came many people panicked.

The Premier, Forgan Smith, recommended the evacuation of urban secondary schools to the country but Duhig opposed him. He wouldn't go along with the defeatism that was rife at the time. It was a difficult time for him. Not only was Ireland neutral - and he considered himself Irish - but Italy, the home of the church, was on Hitler's side.

"He was appalled at the treatment of Italians here in Australia. Did you know that within a month of Italy's entry into the war there were 240 Italian internees in Brisbane. Duhig said mass for them. Preached in Italian. Took them rosaries, cigarettes, cigars, Italian books. 634 Italians were interred in Queensland, mostly heads of families. They were moved to South Australia because that was further from the war zone. He fought for a fair deal for Italians, for those who had left their native home to settle in Queensland. He railed against what he saw as Anglo-Saxon xenophobia and named the then Governor of Queensland Sir Leslie Wilson. Good as called him racist."

To my surprise I found myself scribbling this down, partly because much of what the old man was telling me went against everything my father had told me.

"Sorry about the lecture," Sid said, rising slowly and dusting down his old coat, "thought it might be of interest to you."

I told him not to be sorry, that I'd learnt things I didn't know.

"Good luck then," he said. "With your project."

Then he turned and ambled away. I felt sorry for him. He was from a generation whose hopes had been dashed, a man whose whole value system, based on a certain European hegemony, had been undermined, replaced by a more open, more tolerant but perhaps more facile culture.

I put on my boots, hitched my backpack, crossed Gotha Street and climbed the stone steps that led up to the floor level of what was to be 'the greatest cathedral in the southern hemisphere'. I stood in the middle of that broken field of failed dreams and closed my eyes. The sun beat down warm, the breeze blew cool. On that flat expanse of broken concrete, surrounded by smashed ornamental balusters and broken parapets, with traffic swirling past on all sides, I stood swaying with the gusts of wind that blew from the southeast; a lone man among

fragments of smashed metho bottles, cheap empty plonk bottles still in their paper wrappers, discarded human flotsam, broken balustrades, hulks of carved stone, ruined pediments, crumbling walls.

Ruins of Greek proportion.

Beneath my feet, below the broken concrete raft that was to be the floor of the cathedral, was the dark damp crypt my father had taken me into all those years ago. It was the only part of the cathedral that was ever finished, a place that served for some years as a site for certain church rituals.

I stood there, eyes closed, swaying gently in the breeze, drifting into another space, one far removed from the stark reality of my actual surrounds. A cloud covered the sun and things went dark. I kept my eyes shut tight, fighting gravity. The noise of passing traffic faded into a background static against which half remembered images came and went, some pleasant, some not so pleasant.

There's a dark subterranean place where frightening images loom out of the gloom. In wooden pews silent figures kneel in prayer while, before the alter, white robed figures come and go, young boys with candles wavering slowly back and forth behind a stone sarcophagus draped in white. A priest carries silver cups and plates in outstretched hands while above, lit by flickering candles, a tortured image of a naked man bleeding on a cross made of crudely painted wood looks out from deep-set dead eyes over a darkness out of which comes, ashen faced, a young boy, walking steadily towards the white flickering candles beneath the figure on the cross, walking towards the sarcophagus, drawn on against his will…

I struggled as one does from a nightmare. The clouds parted and the sun shone strong and the visions faded. From the far corner of the ruins a figure appeared out of a clump of dark bushes; a dirty old man in ragged clothes, with unwashed face and long matted hair and boots without socks, clutching a bottle of plonk in one hand, stumbled forward into the breeze, squinting into the light. He saw me. We stood, the two of us, face to face across that field of desolation. I gazed into the man's sunken eyes, deep into the depths of his eyes. The old derro gazed back at me, a stranger on his territory, and uttered an oath. In his eyes I saw caverns deep and dimly lit. They threatened to draw me in, those eyes. But I

resisted. The derro moved menacingly. I stepped back. We stood there, not ten paces between us. Then, in one quick and violent gesture, he threw the empty bottle. It rose out of that backdrop of desolation into blue emptiness where, caught for an instance at the mid point of its flight, it sparkled. Then fell slowly to earth. It was beautiful, that falling bottle. Then it hit and a thousand jagged fragments rose on their own trajectories, stayed mid air for a moment in sparkles of glistening light before falling to crash and lie dormant among all the other rubbish strewn across that bitter field.

11

What did these scattered bits of the city's palimpsest have to do with me? And why should they affect me so strongly? I could claim no ancestral attachment to the people who'd built the bora rings, at least not as far as I was aware, and I was not of the Catholic faith. Yet an odd sense of loss persisted as I walked away from the ruins of the cathedral. Why I should feel this so strongly I could not fathom. Maybe it had to do with early experiences. I thought again of that time when my father took me to the crypt beneath the cathedral, remembering a high stone wall and a dark doorway and going through the doorway (I vaguely recall an arch with some carved figures) down a set of stone steps and into a dark void that was like being in a tomb with fallen stone idols lying across a flooded concrete floor and a smell of rot and urine and my father pointing to the decay and destruction and saying 'Son, this is all that remains of the dreams of a pompous man'. And I recalled my first encounter with a bora ring and how it seemed so old and not from any world I knew.

I walked up Ann Street past St Johns Anglican Cathedral (at that time another unfinished edifice to religion), gazing as I passed at the unfinished façade and the untopped towers, wondering at religion, power and the competition that existed between the two dominant faiths of the city. Catholics and Anglicans (or, as my father always said, the C of Es). With the demise of the Holy Name Cathedral the Catholics were left with St Stephens, a fine but small cathedral church. If size was an indication of success the Anglicans were winning.

Not that any if this mattered one iota to most of the city's denizens.

I went down through the city towards the river. At the intersection of Wharf Street, Eagle Street and Queen streets was a Banyan tree. It had been there for as long as I could remember, each passing year adding to the amazing complexity of its curtain roots. Magnificent it was, proudly standing there among the high-rise buildings, a reminder that Brisbane was, despite everything, a subtropic city. That tree, planted back god knew when, had survived even as all around it had changed. Standing there beneath its complex web of roots and branches, surrounded by tall

glass fronted buildings with their fancy facades and gleaming foyers (into which I'd never go) I could have been in any modern Asian city. There was a time when I thought knew my city. But as I stood beneath the spreading tentacles of that magnificent tree I knew that it was not my city and that I understood nothing about its inner workings. I had no idea what went on inside those surrounding buildings, or what really drove the city. Maybe no one did. I was a stranger, an outsider. For just that moment, in that triangle of land surrounded by those tall buildings and busy roads, there was just the tree and me. All else seemed an illusion.

We were old enough, the tree and me, to recall a time when none of those tall surrounding buildings existed, when the tallest building was City Hall. Unlike me, however, the tree would outlive the city. I imagined a future time; a time beyond civilization, the buildings of the city crumbling, the tree fanning its roots out like those figs of ruined Asian temples, covering the crumbling stone and concrete and steel of the abandoned city. If ever civilisation failed humid subtropic Brisbane would be among the first cities to disappear, covered in creepers and vines and trees like this one; a city obliterated by the nature that it constantly had to hold in check.

I crossed Eagle Street and went down to the riverbank at Petrie Bight. This was 1981; the city was in transition. Nowhere was this more apparent than the shoreline of Petrie Bight, with its abandoned wharves stretching away to Circular Quay. It was an in-between time; before the city reaches of the river would been reclaimed as public domains but after the wharves and the cargo ships that once lined the city's wharves had gone and the shipping that had offered such a sense of movement and excitement had moved to the new and deeper port facilities downriver, leaving rotting wharves, vacant land and muddy river banks.

I found a seat at the river's edge near the Customs House, it's weathered stone retaining walls of rising out of the brown tidal river water like something out of Dickens's London. Beyond the Customs House the old wharves were silent. Across the river, apartment buildings rose out of the land where the Evans Deakin shipyards used to be. Beneath the high steel cantilevers of the Story Bridge, at the point where the river turned sharply on itself and began its long meandering way

towards the bay, parklands replaced the dark foundry sheds with their flames of burning coal. How was it, I asked myself, that industries once employing thousands of workers could vanish and the city not only survive but prosper?

I watched the river traffic passing, content for the moment to bide my time. Tiny wooden ferry boats tacked back and forth across the fast flowing tidewater. A coral barge silently beat its way upriver towards the cement works at Darra. A dredge worked the river floor, hauling up loads of gravel. A speedboat flashed past. I took out my journal and did a quick sketch of the Story Bridge, its great grey cantilever spans glowing in the morning light.

I finished my sketch and wrote:

9 am. Already hot and steamy. No rain last night but sure to be a storm tonight. No breeze. The city seems still, as if waiting for something.

A woman appeared, leant on the rail above the river.

"Nice view," she said, turning to me.

I agreed it was.

"Hot," she offered.

She looked flushed.

"Be a breeze later," I offered.

She was well-dressed. I guessed she was from out of town.

She came over.

"Mind if I sit," she said.

I moved to make room. She was about my age and carried a faint smell of perfume, probably expensive. God knows what I smelt like!

"Saw you sketching," she said.

I shrugged, asked her what she was doing in this part of town. She told me she'd escaped fro a boring conference session, had gone for a walk and got a bit lost. She wiped her brow with a hanky, turned to me and asked if I had the right time.

I told her the correct time. She thanked me, said she was visiting and got confused with the different time zones.

"Where from?" I asked.

"Adelaide," she said.

I asked if she was up for long.

"A few days," she said.

"Business," I asked (tourists weren't common in downtown Brisbane back then).

"I'm with the art gallery in Adelaide," she said after a thoughtful pause, "I'm here to check out the plans for your new gallery. It's going to be impressive…"

"About time," I offered.

"The gallery? I guess so. Better late than never."

"Lot of catching up to do," I said.

"That's Brisbane," she said.

"That's Brisbane," I repeated, feeling just a little offended.

"I didn't know what to expect," she said. "Everyone talks of Brisbane as… well, as the deep north. But it's not what I expected. I get the feeling things are changing. Maybe the new gallery will help. That's what the people I'm working with say anyway."

I said I hoped she was right. Then I asked her what area she was involved in. She said she was advising on storage, that it wasn't a particularly exciting area but that it was important.

She turned back to the river. I followed her gaze.

"Quite pretty, isn't it," she said.

I looked out over the river to the great grey cantilever spans of the Story Bridge rising against the sky, the river curving beneath, the mangroves along the opposite shore, the apartment buildings poking out of the trees all along the Kangaroo Point shore. She was right; it was pretty, in a gentle sort of way. Restful really.

A cooling gust of wind blew upriver from the south. Maybe a change was coming.

"And what do you do," she asked, glancing at my backpack, no doubt taking in my dishevelled appearance (which, to my relief, didn't seem to concern her).

She was looking at me in a strange way. Sexy almost. She made me feel, well, horny! It was an interesting situation: the breeze off the river, her so close and, well, a long time between any intimate contact with her sex. This single life… this being on the road… this being the flaneur… it was all a cop-out really. But I was free, and in that freedom my mind sometimes wandered, encompassing all sorts of thoughts and dreams. Sometimes I'd be the town planner, fixing all the wrongs of the city; sometimes I'd be the social planner fixing societies ills. And sometimes I'd just feel horny.

"Well…" she asked.

Her smiling teeth!

Fuck! She was beautiful!

I told her what I was doing. It all came out in a rush and I'm sure she wouldn't have understood any of it.

"I'm a flaneur in my own city," I added needlessly.

"Oh," she said, and turned back to the river.

Oh, oh, I thought. Lost it there.

She turned back to me. "Flaneur," she said. "That's some kind of…"

"Traveller," I offered. "One who walks through cities. Meeting people along the way…"

"Sounds like performance art," she offered.

I said I guessed in some ways it was. I had in fact thought of it that way and was pleased by this perceptive offering from this stranger who'd given me the hardest hard-on I'd ever known.

"I guess we take our cities for granted," she said. "I never looked at my city the way you seem to be looking at yours. From what you've told me this place has a lot to offer. Like those… what did you call them; those Aboriginal grounds?"

"Bora grounds."

"Oh! Bora. Never heard of them. None in South Australia as far as I know."

I told her that as far as I knew they were confined to Queensland and northern New South Wales.

"And that," she said, indicating my journal, "is your record of the journey?"

I said it was. She asked if I was going to publish it. I said I probably wouldn't.

"Pity," she said. "Could make a good story."

I laughed, said I lacked the skills. Then, changing the subject, asked her how long she was staying. She said she was flying back that night. I said that was a pity. She laughed and asked why. I shrugged, said you never knew. The electricity between us was strong. At least it was from my direction! I wanted to take her to the nearest hotel room right then. For some reason I thought of M, my one time lover. I told her once that she was like the city: great topography but all over the place. It probably wasn't the wisest comment I'd ever made, especially to a woman! This woman, whose name I didn't know, was like Adelaide: bit less topography but a bit more subtle. I thought I'd keep that observation to myself.

"By the way," she said, interrupting my somewhat disjointed thoughts about women and cities, "my name is Alice. Alice Mortlock."

I don't know why, but that sounded a suitably Adelaide name.

I told her my name. She said it sounded appropriate. I laughed. We were getting on fine. Trouble was, I had a schedule of sorts and so had she. It was, I figured, one of those meetings that would go nowhere. And I'd had a few of them! But what if… My mind began to wander. I began to have irrationally vivid and erotic thoughts.

"Penny for your thoughts," she said.

I turned to the woman called Alice Mortlock, apologised, said I was miles away.

"Where?" she asked.

"All over the place."

"It's rather nice," she said, indicating the river. "At least it could be if they got rid of those old wharves, made a bit more of the river..."

"It'll happen," I said. "There are plans…"

She sighed, said she'd better be going, that she dare not miss the next session, which was about storage.

"Pity," I offered.

"Yes," she replied. "It was nice talking to you."

We got up.

"Where do you go from here," she asked.

"To the ferry," I replied, indicating the ferry landing. "I have to cross over."

"I'll walk you to the ferry," she said.

We stood side by side at the ferry landing, watching the little wooden ferry come arcing across the tide. It sidled into the pontoon and two people got off. We said our farewells and I walked down the gangway to the waiting ferry.

12

I stood on the open back deck, watching the city recede as the little boat arced crabwise across the river. From the opposite landing I walked up the gangway under a great bright span of summer sky. A soft breeze blew down the river, carrying with it the caressing carelessness of the subtropics. Below the swaying gangway brown tidewater lapped a muddy beach. Small crabs scurried about between mangrove shoots. A water rat ran along the rock wall that defined the river's edge. The sound of the ferry, returning one more time to the other side, died in the breeze. From the top of the gangway, just before the entrance to the ferry shelter, I turned and looked back across the river, scanning the shore. There was no sign of Alice Mortlock.

As I entered the ferry shelter an old man rose from his seat and stood before me. A badge on his lapel caught the light. It was an RSL badge, highly polished and obviously proudly worn.

"I can see you're a travelling man," he said. "Would you mind helping me along a bit. Shaky on the legs you know."

I took the old man's arm and together we ambled out into the bright light of the riverside park with its trees and flowers and smell of freshly cut grass. In the middle of the park the old man stopped, turned to me and said, in a well-modulated voice from some other time, "Much appreciated. Getting on y' know. Can't believe where all the years've gone."

I asked him where he was going.

"Not to heaven, that's for sure."

He gave a little laugh, turned to me, said, "Mind if I sit."

We sat under the shade of a Poinciana, looking back through its drooping umbrella of fine green leaves and bright orange blossoms to the city's towers across the river. They rose up from the low banks, glistening in the morning light.

"Good isn't it," he said, indicating the scene before us.

I had to admit that it did look good.

"I'm originally from the bush," he said. "Nothing like that there."

I asked him if he'd mind if I updated my journal. He said he didn't. I got it out and made some hurried notes about the city and my recent encounters. When I'd finished I did an equally quick sketch of the view the old man had been so taken with. Then I closed the book.

"That some kind of project," he asked.

I said it was, sort of.

"What it about," he wanted to know.

Same old question, same one I'd asked myself more than once. I said that I was just getting to know the place, getting to know how it ticked, getting to know the people.

"Like me," he said

"I guess so," I replied.

"Been doing it for long," he wanted to know.

"Some time," I replied.

"This for some kind of book?"

"Maybe."

"Guess you hear a few stories."

"A few."

*"*Want to hear mine?*"*

"Maybe," I replied, hoping he wouldn't take up too much of my time.

"I'm from the bush, as I said. Parents had a property out past Esk. Brisbane Valley. Good land it was, but unpredictable. Flood and fire and drought. Usual story. Real enough though, when you're trying to scratch a living. As my parents were. They tried beef cattle and some mixed farming. Even a bit of dairying for a time. Had some good seasons. Then, in 1915, we moved. Don't know why. Never found out. It was way out west. Place you wouldn't know. Huge cattle property out from Charleville. Dust and flies. Bloody hot in summer, freezing cold winter nights. My parents struggled through every useless battle you could imagine. When the war broke out I enlisted. So did my older brother. It was a way out really. Chance to get away. Off to the big adventure. I was lucky. Didn't really see much action. He wasn't so lucky. Killed in battle over there. Parents never saw the body.

I think they were proud of us, my parents, but the death of my brother hurt. He was the favourite of the family. Answered the call to arms. Went proudly to meet the Turk and never returned. The senseless sands of Gallipoli. Sacrifice to the blood and fire and waste of war."

The old man went quiet, sat as if deep in thought. I didn't know what to say.

"Sorry," he said, "It's difficult. Anyway, I came back, went to teachers college. I was the only one of the family who went to college and into a career. Taught in schools throughout the state. Spent years in the reeking sweating classrooms of country schools where I tried to teach against all the odds. And for what? For a retirement that couldn't come too soon and that lasted too long. I was at Longreach during the Depression. I remember long and dirty roads, empty except for men heading towards the city. Others heading the other way. All lost. My other brothers ended up here in Brisbane. It was a pretty grubby place then you know. They were no-hopers, my brothers. Succumbed to the gutters of grog and the ignominy of filthy boarding houses. I sometimes think about the brother who died over there. He died early, maybe even nobly. But I sometimes think that I suffered more than him. He died young, before he found out the truth about life. Oh what fools we were. All that stuff about Empire."

He stopped, took a breath, continued.

"This badge," he said, pointing to his lapel, "is a badge of honour. Despite what I feel about the war – all wars for that matter – this badge still matters. Strange isn't it; the way things turn out; that despite all the bitterness I feel towards that war, and the reasons for it, I still march on Anzac Day! What fools we are indeed. All beyond our understanding really…"

He struggled to rise, said he'd better not keep me any longer. I helped him up, helped him along. At the door to the front bar of the Story Bridge Hotel he stopped, turned to me and asked if I wanted a beer. It sounded like a good idea.

"Maybe just one quick one," I said, "Got to keep moving."

"Eve en en Merv," called the barman as we entered.

The old man gave a grunt that somehow came out friendly. Obviously he was a regular. The barman, a jovial bloke with a huge moustache and lurid tattoos, poured two beers and plonked them before us.

Merv sipped his beer, considered me for a long moment from his bar stool, said, "This walk you're on…What's it really about?"

I thought 'what the heck' and told him I was walking the Brisbane Line.

"Ah, he said, The Brisbane Line…"

A smile played about lips that could have been sarcastic but wasn't.

"It was Eddie Ward you know. Member for North Sydney. He was the one who raised the matter in Parliament. Said that the Fadden and Menzies Government had agreed to a scorched earth policy, that the entire country above Brisbane would be burnt, that only the south east would be defended. Ward was a firebrand but he had a bloody fine wit. He once referred to a member of the Opposition being 'as stolid as an ox, with the vacant stare of centuries upon his brow'."

He gave me a devilish look, said, "Good huh!"

"As stolid as an ox, with the vacant stare of centuries upon his brow," he repeated, and gave a hearty laugh, which ended in a raking cough. When he'd recovered he said, "You know the best bit…?"

I sipped some beer, shook my head.

"Under parliamentary privilege Ward told the House that he'd been reliably informed that an important report was missing from the official files. Those few words ended up forcing Curtin to seek the dissolution of Parliament. Some people claimed that it was the most eventful day in the whole history of Federal Parliament. Curtin called for a Royal Commission into the matter of the Brisbane Line. Ward was stood down as Minister and the next day Parliament was dissolved. But Labor won the following election so Ward was vindicated.

"That, he added, was the Brisbane Line I knew. What's your's got to do with all that?"

I told him my walk didn't have all that much to do with the Brisbane Line of 1942, but that when I learnt about it I began to think about Brisbane and its place in the world. I told him that the more I thought about that line the more important it

seemed. He agreed, said that if the Americans hadn't arrived and pushed back the Japanese advance the whole history of this country would have changed.

"Not a lot of people knew about it," he added. "The Brisbane Line that is. But for some – and I was one – it was a turning point in the attitude of people north of Brisbane towards the south. It's funny," he added, "Whatever friction there was between Brisbane and Canberra was nothing compared to the attitude those in regional north Queensland had towards their distant capital."

I asked him what he meant.

"I worked in the country you know. Got to know country people. They thought Brisbane people didn't care. Especially those in the north. Wanted a separate state they did. Who can blame them. The Brisbane Line wouldn't have saved them!"

And he told me a long-winded tale about being in Townsville one time when a cyclone struck and houses were torn down and shops were flooded. He said it was 1971, a few years after he'd retired, and that he was there visiting friends when it struck and he'd never known anything like it and how they were near the coast in an old Queenslander that shook so badly he thought it'd take off but it didn't, just stayed there swaying in a howling wind of over two hundred kilometres an hour and how three people died and many more were injured and a whole housing Trust estate of two hundred homes was destroyed and how people complained that the authorities one thousand miles to the south in Brisbane were slow to act.

"To those people," he said after a pause, "Brisbane was part of the south. Nothing to do with the Queensland they knew. Another country."

I sipped my beer. He sipped his. The barman came over, said he'd overheard, said he agreed, said that Queensland needed to be split into three separate states.

"Won't happen," Merv said. "Brisbane won't allow it."

"Nah," offered the barman. "Guess you're right Merv. Lose all that power, wouldn't they."

Then, seeing my empty glass, the barman asked if I'd like another. I said I had to get going. Merv said he guessed he did too.

We walked out into the light.

'I'm up this way," he said, pointing up Main Street.

At the corner of Main and Amesbury street he stopped.

"I'm just down here," he said, pointing down the little dead-end street that led towards the river. "Guess I'll say goodbye."

I told him I'd enjoyed our meeting.

"Good luck with your walk," he said. Then he coughed, and coughed.

"You all right?" I asked pathetically.

"Doesn't matter any more anyway, does it. All that stuff about the war and the past," he said. "The past's as dead as I'll soon be."

He turned and walked away. I watched him go. He looked so small, so bent, so lonely.

13

I turned off Main Street into River Terrace. There's a lookout there, at the edge of the cliffs, from where you can see out over the river and the city. I stopped and leant on the parapet, gazing across the river. It's a great view: the wide river and the sweep of mangroves curving round Gardens Point, the city gardens beyond that, then the city and suburbs fading away to Mt Coot ha and the mountains beyond; mountains that enclosed the valley from where I'd started my walk. They seemed a long way away. Further downstream the towers of the city glowed in the mid-morning light.

Gazing upon those buildings and the city spreading out it was difficult to imagine how it had all happened in so short a time, how the land that was once Mianjin could have been so transformed into this thing called Brisbane. I tried to imagine John Oxley in his whale boat, rowing up that wide river, noting in his journal the verdant banks and the tall hoop pines he thought ideal for large top masts and the numerous 'natives' and smoke from their fires. In all that long journey, up what he called the 'largest river in New South Wales, he would have seen not one human construction. But what did Oxley recommend for this river he so admired? That the part of it once called Mianjin would make an ideal location for a convict settlement!

What is it that makes a city interesting? Is it size? Is it location? Is it fortune? Is it fate? Is it tragedy? Is it the movement of human populations? Is it any of these things? It's not just size: New York is no more interesting, at least no more different or exceptional now than it was when it's population was less than Brisbane's is now. The city I gazed upon that summer's day in 1981 was not the city it is today, or will be tomorrow. It was, as I've noted, a city in transition. What I wondered then, standing at the edge of those high cliffs, was whether it would ever be a city of consequence. In terms of size it was already larger than many a city of note. In terms of location, it was already cementing its place as a major port of the Pacific Rim. In terms of fortune it had its share, particularly in the mining of resources. In terms of fate, it was not the first choice as capital of Queensland and

only gained that title by fate. In terms of tragedy, it had its share of deadly floods, not to mention the near extinction of its first peoples. As for the movement of human populations, where does one begin? With the demise of the old people, then the influx of British, European and Asian migrants, then waves of peoples from throughout the Asia-Pacific region. The latter had begun before 1981 and would continue unabated, until the Europeans would become the minority, just as the first people had after the European invasion. From its near abandonment following the abolition of Transportation in 1842 the town had spread 200 kilometres along the coast, its population increasing ten fold between the end of the Second World War and 2012.

So it was I found myself gazing down upon something I saw as remarkable when I was startled by a voice.

"Wonderful view, huh, the voice said."

I turned to find a balding rotund man in shorts and gaudy Hawaiian shirt standing beside me, and a woman, presumably his wife, standing close beside him.

"My apologies," he said in a North American accent. "Interrupted your thoughts…"

"It's OK," I said. "Just daydreaming."

"You local," he asked.

"Sort of," I answered.

"We're from West Virginia," the man offered. "I was here during the war. Army. 1943. Thought I'd come back and see. Bring the wife. It's nothing like the I expected. I remember it as kinda dark. Crowded streets and trams everywhere. Sort of mini London, only hot."

"Town where we're from," interrupted the wife, "sure aint this big."

"By the way," the man said, "names Harvey."

Harvey stuck out a fleshy hand. I suffered the grip.

"And this is Edith. My wife."

I turned to the woman, shook her hand. It was sweaty. Like her partner she carried far too much weight. Her shorts said she didn't care, although she had put a bit of effort into her hair.

"Real pleased to meet you," she said. "And what's your name sir?"

"Arthur Bloom," I lied.

We turned back to the river.

"What's that?" Harvey asked, pointed into the distance.

It took me a while to work out what he was referring to.

"A windmill," I replied. "Used to have sails but they never turned. Built in 1829. Served for a time as a treadmill. Punishment for the convicts. Oh, and as a hanging place. For convicts and blacks."

"Sounds rough," Edith said. "Harvey was here during the war. He thought there was something odd about the place, said that the people seemed aggrieved. We haven't found that, have we Harvey?"

"Nah," answered Harvey. "The people seem real nice."

"Great river," Harvey added. "The way it winds around the city…"

"Mianjin," I said, pronouncing it mee an yin.

"Yes it does meander," said Edith, mishearing me.

"I mean, that's what the area where the city is now was called before the Europeans came and called it Brisbane. Mee…an…yin. You have to roll the sound off the tongue, like in a song. Means finger of land. Or shinbone. Old language… Song language."

They looked at me quizzically.

"What language?" Harvey wanted to know.

"Not sure. Maybe Yaggara. Or Turrabul. Terrible how little we know of those things," I added, feeling guilty about my lack of knowledge of my own city's history.

"You know, said Harvey, I never thought about that; that there were people here before… Like back in the States; we tend to forget the native Indians."

After a long pause, during which I assumed Harvey was mulling over this thought, he said, "We visited the General MacArthur museum earlier. It's in Queen Street. His office is still there, just as it was in 1942. Lots of other stuff there too; stuff to do with the war and all…"

Harvey stopped, stared out over the river. For the first time I took a good look at him. He seemed older and more vulnerable than my first impression, and nothing like the image my father painted of US troops as pompous skites. I found myself warming to this small rotund and bald man.

"You been there," he asked. To the MacArthur museum."

I said I had, that I'd found it fascinating (in fact I'd been there twice looking for information in preparation for my walk).

"Bit of a shock," he said. I had no idea what went on here between our troops and yours during those years. There were newspaper clippings there about a battle in the main street between our troops and the Aussies. The Battle for Brisbane they called it. Our MPs fired into a crowd of Aussie soldiers. One was shot dead, others wounded. Next night mobs of Aussie soldiers roamed the streets attacking US military police and American soldiers escorting local girls. The whole thing was hushed up. I only found out by visiting that museum."

I recalled a story my father told (more than once) about a local man who was knocked down by an American car and taken by US ambulance to a US hospital. The man later sought compensation but instead was given a bill for seven weeks hospital at $5 US a week.

"Damn rough," offered Harvey. "We were just GIs, doing our job. A lot went on that we knew nothing about. I thought everything was fine, that we were all buddies. You find out things later. Funny that! I was here but I had no idea. Was never told. Just soldiers we were. Doing our duty…"

Harvey was getting into a state. Edith was becoming increasingly anxious. I was looking for a way out.

A face appeared over the edge of the cliff.

"I'll be doggone,' uttered Harvey.

A fit young man scrambled over the cliff edge, hauled a length of rope up after him. He rolled up the rope and went loping off.

"What was all that about," Harvey asked.

"Abseiler," I explained. "They're all along these cliffs, especially on weekends."

"Be great to be that fit", said Harvey. "Used to be once. When I was in the army."

"Looks dangerous," said Edith, leaning over the edge. "It's a long way down."

"And what's your line of business?" Harvey asked me, changing tack.

"Walking," I said.

"Walking!" echoed Edith.

"Yes; walking across the city."

"How long is this walk," asked Edith.

"From there," I said, pointing towards the blue line of mountains to the west. "To there." I turned and pointing to the east. "From the mountains to the sea."

"Is it some kind of tour," Harvey asked. "I didn't see anything in our tour guide."

I laughed, told him it was something I was making up as I went. Harvey shook his head. Edith said it sounded interesting but she had already lost interest. A coral barge, fully laden, eased its way upstream, heading for the Darra Cement Works. Two speedboats zoomed downriver. A cross-river ferry bobbed in the wake. A yacht, sails wrapped, cruised into the city marina. A paddleboat eased out of the dock at Riverside.

"Real hive of activity," Edith said. "Not like I imagined it would be."

I'd had enough of Edith and Harvey, said I had to go.

"Sure nice meeting you," they called in unison as I left.

14

By the time I got to Woolloongabba I was sweating profusely and shuffling along the footpath like an old derro. Despite the declining sun and the gathering rainclouds it was still hot. Humid too. The previous day's walk had been relatively easy; despite the stiff climb out of the valley and constant stops along the way I'd covered a good bit of ground. But the strain (and the pain) was catching up. I was finding the going really tough. Under a tree in a little park near the Woolloongabba cricket ground I stopped to rest.

I once looked up the meaning – or, rather, meanings - of Woolloongabba. They included: *Woolloon capemm*, meaning 'whirling waters'; *Woolloon gabba*, meaning 'fight talk place'; string of waterholes; or One Mile Swamp. Take your pick. I liked the name because it was an old name. Like those other old Brisbane names that, to me, linked the city back before European time; names like Banyo and Beerburrum and Boondall and Bulimba and Burpengary and Buranda and Caboolture and Capalaba and Coorparoo and Corinda and Dakabin and Dayboro and Doomben and Elimbah and Enoggera and Geebung and Goodna and Hendra and Inala and Indooroopilly and Jimboomba and Jindalee and Kallangur and Keperra and Kalinga and Kippa-ring and Kuraby and Kurwongbah and Larapinta and Meeandah and Moggill and Moodlu and Moorooka and Muirlea and Mundoolun and Munruben and Murarrie and Murrumba Downs and Mutdapilly and Myora and Moongalpa and Narangba and Nindooinbah and Ningi and Nudgee and Nundah and Pallara and Pimpama and Pinjarra Hills and Pinkinba and Tabragalba and Taigum and Tallegalla and Tanah Merah and Tarampa and Taringa and Taragindi and Thagoona and Tingalpa and Toombul and Toorbul and Toowong and Torwood and Undullah and Wakol and Walloon and Wamuran and Wanora and Woolloongabba and Wooloowin and Woorim and Wulkuraka and Wynnum and Yamanto and Yarabilla and Yatala and Yeerongpilly and Yeronga and Zillmere…

Names never written down until the arrival of the white men; whose meanings changed in translation; became mispronounced and, for the most part,

misunderstood. Woolloongabba was once an important gathering place for the Jagera and Turrbul peoples but the waterholes and the surrounding jungle from those times had long gone, as had the Five Ways where the steam trains used to cross preceded by a fireman with a bell and red flag, banking up traffic for miles. Leaving the cricket ground - 'The Gabba' - as possibly Brisbane's only internationally recognised landmark. The Gabba's fame was boosted by the famous tied cricket test of 9 – 14 December 1960.

Those were days of six-day tests. On the over of the last day of that famous test, on 14 December 1960, people all over the world, me included, were glued to the radio. The call went something like this:

Australia needs six runs from eight balls to win. The West Indies need three wickets to win. Wes Hall is bowling. Wally Grout is on strike, Richie Benaud at the bowler's end. The first ball hits Wally Grout on the thigh and Richie Benaud, at the other end, calls him through for a single.

Five runs needed, seven balls remaining, three wickets in hand.

On the second ball Benaud attempts a hook shot and is caught behind by wicket-keeper Gerry Alexander.

Five runs needed, six balls remaining, two wickets in hand.

The third ball is cut to mid-off by new batsman Ian Meckiff but it's stopped and there's no run.

Five runs needed, five balls remaining, two wickets in hand.

The fourth ball flies down leg side without making contact with Meckiff's bat and Grout calls Meckiff through for a bye. Alexander throws the ball to the bowler's end but Meckiff makes his ground.

Four runs needed, four balls remaining, two wickets in hand.

Grout lofts the fifth ball to square leg, there's a mix-up in the field between Hall and Rohan Kanhai and a single is taken.

By this time the announcer is screaming.

Three runs needed from three balls. Two wickets in hand.

Meckiff swings the sixth ball desperately towards the mid-wicket boundary. The batsmen run two runs and are coming back for a third but Conrad Hunte

scoops up the ball just inside boundary and sends it flat and true to keeper Alexander who whips off the bails before Grout can make his ground.

The teams are tied. One run for victory, one wicket in hand, two balls remaining.

The announcer is beside himself.

New batsman Lindsay Kline pushes the seventh ball to square leg and sets off for a single. Joe Solomon scoops the ball up and, from 12 yards out and side on to the stumps, lets fly. The ball hits the stump and Meckiff is out by inches!

That's how it played out. The cricket world was speechless. The first tied test in eighty four years of cricket! For which The Gabba would be forever famous.

I walked on, past the silent stands towards East Brisbane. There were few cars on the road and no one on the footpath apart from me. I felt an uneasy sense of foreboding, which wasn't helped by the darkening sky. By the time I got to the bridge over Norman Creek I could smell rain. The clouds, which had been building up all afternoon, had begun to turn that peculiar green that signals hail. It was not an auspicious start for what would be a long walk through the lowlands.

In the gathering gloom I found myself on a back road beside the Wynnum railway embankment. I needed to cross the line, but where? I continued on until I came to an underpass. On the other side I found myself in a broad expanse of open ground in the Norman Creek floodplains. A sign said Bottomly Park. Bottomly Park was a dank, low lying, treeless expanse of buffalo grass, barely above sea level and bounded by the railway embankment on one side and deserted streets on the other three sides. The only building in the park was a small corrugated iron dressing shed with the name of a local football club painted on in fading colours. A faded white line on the weedy grass delineated a rugby field. The darkening sky added to the general feeling of depression and low confinement. The houses around the park were mostly cheap weatherboards sitting ungainly on wooden stumps in treeless yards, some with verandas boarded in to create extra living space. The whole place was open to the elements, including cyclones that occasional swept through and, with nothing much to stop them, blew howling around the shaking houses, tearing sheets of iron from roofs and shattering windows. I had experienced

those storms (one had torn through the flatlands before my parent's house and, channelled by the hills of Albion and Nunda, roared across Melrose Park and came at us, tearing off the roof and shattering nearly all the windows). My father the atheist once said that those summer storms of Brisbane, so sudden, so dramatic and so unpredictable, coming as they did after such hellish humid days, were put on by God to demonstrate our insignificance, and that it took a brave person indeed to stand out in one and shout back at them for it would be like shouting back at God.

And a storm was certainly brewing; had been ever since I'd crossed the river. The sky was a deep and dangerous-looking green and the temperature had fallen significantly, a sure sign there'd be hail. There's always an eerily stillness before such storms, as if nature was taking a long deep breath before letting us have it. And it did come down, at first a few pings on the iron roof, then bigger hailstones building to a furious downpour covering the park in a snow white mantle within seconds. I waited under the eaves of the shed, pressed against the wall as the hail came down. In that almost dark there was just the hail falling, unrelenting. I felt cold. Then the hail stopped and the rain came. It kept coming, even as the ice melted and surface of the park turned into a sodden shallow lake.

Then, as I stood under the eaves waiting out the storm, a little girl in a flimsy nylon dress appeared. With no shoes and nothing on her head she walked through the rain into the middle of the park and began a little dance, laughing up at the thunder and lightning. At first she turned slowly, her arms outstretched, spinning to some unheard music. From the shelter of the eaves I watched the little girl dance.

Let the little girl dance

Let the little girl dance…

Even as the lightning flashed and the thunder cracked she danced. And I saw that it was not so much in defiance of the storm that she danced but in accord with its trembling emotions, answering whatever the storm threw down, dancing beneath that flashing sky with sensual movements of her body. Round and round she went, dancing across that sodden field, even as the storm raged and the rain poured down. Until the wind died and the rain settled to a grey drizzle. She stopped

then and walked away; heading towards one of the flat-faced houses whose interior spaces I knew, just knew, would be devoid of any reference to art or culture, would contain absolutely nothing beyond the bare essentials of life and the detritus from supermarkets.

The storm blew itself out. The late afternoon sun beat down through thinning clouds. Steam rose from hard surfaces. Brisbane! There wasn't much in the way of regular seasons – no real winter and few autumn leaves to speak of – but it could put on a show: five seasons in three hours; from blazing sun to scudding cloud of humid warmth to sheets of cold ice, to wet to warm and humid and, finally, cool clear nights before the morning sun sucked moisture to humid air.

I continued on through the post-storm humidity, past cheap wooden houses rising out of empty yards and unkempt lawns and sadly neglected flowerbeds and driveways that were little more than bare tracks worn into weeds leading down the sides of houses to backyards bare as the front, interspersed among the houses rows of cheap brick walk-up flats with flat aluminium framed windows reflecting the late afternoon sunlight and exposed concrete staircases gone all grotty.

Desolation Row!

Outside the flats, between accumulations of battered cars, crude uncut buffalo grass spread its insidious tendrils while, from out of cracks in concrete driveways, prickly weeds sprouted. No one cared. There was little evidence of civic pride in this dag-end of town. Whoever owned those flats happily ripped off rent from people who couldn't afford any thing else. The surviving once grand houses were even more depressing, listing on rotting stumps, paint peeling, their uncaring owners waiting for the next best offer from whoever would tear them down and replace them with more depressing flat-fronted flats.

In the front yard of a unit block two young men – one fat and sweaty, the other skinny and tattooed - were bent into the open bonnet of a rust-bucket, working the accelerator cable, engine stressing like some wounded animal, blue smoke pouring from the exhaust pipe, heavy rock music pounding from the car's speakers. The skinny one pulled his head out from the bonnet, saw me, offered a vicious, "What the fuck're you starin' at shithead," waving a spanner at me as he

did. His fat mate lifted his head too quickly, bumping his head on the bonnet as he did. This elicited a loud oath and a tirade of abuse directed at me.

I walked on fast, past an old weatherboard on leaning stumps wedged between flat-fronted blocks of flats, protected by a rusted steel mesh fence behind which savage guard dogs barked angrily, under-the-house chock full of junk, old cars, bits of machinery, pipes and god knew what else, the house itself well past demolition stage, sagging with the accumulated weight of rubbish.

Then, quite suddenly, I passed out of that zone of desolation and entered an entirely different realm of well-kept houses and pretty gardens and flowering street trees. My spirits lifted as I walked through those leafy zigzag streets, admiring the pretty gardens and the tall flowering trees. Magpies carolled from lawns, Koels koelled from high trees and small birds chirruped from bushes. The breeze, which had picked up from the south, blew the sticky sweat from my skin. The last real heat of the day had gone. Everything seemed greener, more hopeful. As I went I was reminded of the times when, as a boy, I'd ride my crappy old bike through the hilly leafy streets of Albion, Hamilton and Ascot, riding for hours until I'd find myself lost and not knowing which was the best way home and not caring, not consciously thinking of anything as I rode along, happy just to be in those leafy streets with their grand old houses. I was always alone, an outsider even then.

15

I eventually found my way to Old Cleveland Road and continued up the long curving rise to Camp Hill, steel rails from the days of trams clearly visible in the middle of the road. From beneath the shade of a tree at the top of the hill I stopped to catch my breath. It was late afternoon, the breeze cool and smell of rain still hanging in the air. From that vantage point I could see back over the city all the way to the hills from where I'd started my journey. They seemed a long way away.

I'd come such a long way. There was still a long way to go. I was tired and concerned about the way ahead, which would be through country I did not know well, and through which I would be walking in the dark. But it was more than that: I had begun to reflect, perhaps more than I should have, on what I was doing. This was brought on partly by the prospect that lay ahead and the view that lay before me.

There was evidence, in the records of colonial times, that at least part of the route I'd taken had followed paths taken by the old people as they journeyed from the shores and islands of the bay to the inland. There had been, across the land on which the city spread, ancient trade routes and ceremonial pathways; some still there beneath the surface. If this was the case this journey of mine was not so much a long walk through a short history but, rather, a short walk through a long history. Furthermore, it follows what was, and remains, disputed territory. The hills and valleys and river banks and forests upon and through which the city spread its tentacles was fought over by people long before Oxley sailed up the river and established the site for the convict settlement that became the city. Among the contestants were the Jagera and Turrbal people, whose descendants continue to lay claim to all of the land that lay before and around me.

But there was more: from the perspective of that shady tree at the top of that hill the city seemed like a great colony of minor organisms only tentatively in control of their destiny; as if the city, curling round the river that ran through it and

gave it life, was host to a parasite organism spreading ever outwards; an organism in its turn subject to larger forces, such as the river that, every now and then, broke its banks to interrupt both the spread of that organism, a reminder that it was subject to forces beyond its control. In the face of such floods the citizens were as much at the mercy of nature as were ants, no more capable of planning than bees. In truth there was no plan real to this city; it simply spread where it could, taking easy paths through valleys and plains and lower hills, leaving the difficult upland forests and swamplands to a bigger nature.

And yet it was these forces of nature (the great summer storms and flooding rains and perfect winter days), together with the disputes of the citizens (fighting political and cultural battles) that, for me at least, gave the city its strength and character. The topography of the city itself, the great ecological diversity of the Scenic Rim that surrounds it on three sides, and the bay and islands to the east, gave the city a rich natural heritage; one that revealed itself slowly to visitors and citizens alike. The early wars between the old people and the European invaders, the establishment of the Australian Labor Party and later battles for civil rights were part of the city's cultural heritage. It was all of these things and more; a city that perplexed even its own citizens.

I carried these thoughts with me as I continued on to what used to be the Belmont tram terminus. I went in to a shop and ordered a soft drink and pie, took them outside and sat gazing out over the road and the tramlines set in concrete in the middle of the road. Belmont was the end of one line in what, up until 1969, had been one of the largest and most modern tramway systems anywhere. As little remembered now as the pathways of the old people.

Or the tracks of ants or mice or long-legged flies…

That civilisation may not sink
It's great battle lost
Quieten the dog
Tether the pony to a distant post
Young Ceasar is in the tent

Where the maps are spread

His head upon a pillow

Like a long-legged fly upon the stream

His mind moves upon nothing.

This particular poem comes to me at times when I'm perplexed at the ways of man, its meaning changing depending on circumstances. Sometimes it's meaning is not revealed at all.

I took my empty bottle back in to the shop, bought some bread and cheese, a frozen coffee and an apple and put them in my backpack. Fodder for the long road ahead.

"Goin someplace," the Greek woman behind the counter wanted to know.

"Down the road," I answered.

"Walkin," she asked, noting my backpack.

I nodded.

"Hope you don't get wet," she offered. "More rain comin."

"Maybe I'll catch the tram," I said.

"Be waitin a while then," she said with a chuckle.

"Going the other way, anyway," I said.

"How far," she asked.

"To the bay," I said.

"Long way," she said. "Glad it's you'n not me."

I could see her point.

"Going through Capalaba," asked a large hairy-chested man in grubby singlet and shorts who'd walked in from the back of the shop.

I said I guessed I would be.

"Better watch out then," he added, "there's been shootings this afternoon at Belmont."

I looked at him, then at the woman.

"At the rifle range," he added with a chuckle.

"Donna listen him," the woman said, "he lika a joke a stupid man."

And she swatted the man, presumably her partner, with a tea towel.

"Well," she offered as I turned to go, "Good luck!"

"And watch out for gun happy yokels," added the man.

I looked back as I passed through the door. They were standing there, the two of them smiling. Just a small business couple making ends meet.

16

I walked on beneath a darkening sky. Halfway across the bridge over Bulimba Creek I stopped. Damp air rose from black tidewater, smell of rain strong in the humid air. On the still, dark water a black duck, trailing its young brood, beat across the flow. From the mangroves came the shrill call of a bird I could not identify. In that dim light, with the air near saturation point and no one about, I felt a disquieting sense of dread.

I went on, past the Belmont Rifle Range and into a countryside empty of houses. It wasn't the sort of country you saw people casually walking in. Not the sort of place any normal person would choose to spend the night out in. I shivered involuntarily. The smell of rain grew stronger. I had a long way to go and no protective clothing. There was no footpath. Sharp stones and roadside rubble upset the rhythm I needed to head off the fatigue and pain of so many hours on the road. I cursed the lack of footpath and the constant flow of traffic that limited use of the flatter, firmer road surface. It was that time of day when car headlights were being switched on, a kind of half light where distant things were silhouetted sharply against the darkening sky.

Streetlamps flickered in harmony with the thunder and lightning. In that half-light I saw a group of figures ahead of me, walking the same way, except much slower, a woman and two boys walking in single file, making difficult progress over the sharp roadside metal. I drew closer. The boys - maybe ten or eleven years old - wore faded t-shirts, tattered shorts and cheap rubber thongs. From behind, the woman seemed young to have children that age. Except that when she turned at the sound of my boots crunching across the stones I saw hard lines of disappointment on a face that was bitter. She wasn't dressed for the occasion. Tight skirt, long out of fashion, and high heels, limited balance on the hard stones. The shopping, which she carried in plastic bags, looked heavy.

As I passed I called out a greeting. It was a simple 'good evening' and meant it to sound friendly, but it came out sort of hollow. Like it hadn't come from

me at all but from some other place. The words floated there, stupid, misjudged and awkward. The boys bowed their heads. The woman looked away. I walked on, wondering what the hell they were doing out there on that lowland road.

The road narrowed to a cutting, leaving no space for pedestrians. A rough and narrow path ran up the rise close to the cutting's edge. The sound of vehicles speeding through the cutting whooshed up threateningly. At the top I found myself on relatively high ground with almost three hundred and sixty degree views. The clouds had lightened and the threat of rain had lessened. To the south the low bulk of Mt Petrie rose against the darkening sky. To the north the land dropped imperceptivity towards the river. To the west the city's electric glow reflected off low clouds. In the east it was already dark. Apart from the roar of cars passing through the cutting there was no sound. It was the most disconsolate landscape I'd ever experienced.

I was about to continue on when I heard the snap of a twig followed by footfalls. It was the woman and her sons coming up the path! I stood very still, watching them pass by. Even in that light I could see that the woman was weary. I felt sorry for her. The two boys trailed behind, one carrying a broken thong, strap dangling. They looked resentful, as only boys of that age can. They disappear down the further slope, heading back towards the road. I gave them time to get well ahead, time enough so that I would not have to pass them again, time enough for them to turn off the highway to wherever it was they were going to, and rejoined the road.

In the dark the headlights of cars coming from behind cast my shadow ahead of me, then gathered it in as they closed. Trick of light! Cars coming the other way blinded me, causing me to stumble. The smell of rain grew stronger. Ahead the lowlands stretched out into blackness. The dark silhouette of a house, a long way off in the middle of a paddock, rose against the southern sky. Further out, beyond the house, the dark shape of hills sat like resting monsters. I was fatigued, beginning to imagine things.

Something was wrong, something to do with balance. The world seemed tilted. For a moment there I had to fight off vertigo. I once saw a painting in an

exhibition that had disturbed me. At first I couldn't work out why until I realised it was because the only humans in the painting, barely seen behind a dark patina of varnish and age, were small figures in the distance, gathered together on one side. They were sketchily drawn but my eye kept returning to them. I couldn't look at that painting without feeling dizzy. Something about the landscape before me reminded me of that painting. Then I saw them, the same group just up ahead on the same side of the road, passing beneath a street lamp. They were like the figures in that painting, only more disturbing. It was like a nightmare where the same things keeps happening over and over and you can't shake them.

I caught up to them just before a narrow footbridge over a dark creek. Right there, before the bridge, the woman turned at my approach. The boys stopped. Then the woman turned back at the sound of a car approaching from the east. The car, faulty muffler roaring, came hurtling down the road towards us, headlights high beaming on the woman who was caught in the glare. The car came fast, a dark and sinister thing. At the last minute it veered, heading for the woman. She dropped her shopping, stepped sideways and almost tripped. At the last minute (the driver may have seen me and the boys) the car straightened up and accelerated away. And as it passed, too close for comfort, there came from within a crude and vulgar yell directed at the woman in the tight dress and absurd high heels:

"Fuckin abo…!"

Those words were like a knife, hitting not just the woman and the boys, now huddled together, but me too. How stupid of me! In all the time the idea of race had never occurred to me. Maybe the woman wasn't Aboriginal. Maybe it was just a stupid remark from a drunken stupid man. What did it matter? The words had been uttered. The woman picked up her bag and gathered the boys.

I walked away, leaving a silent scream hanging in the humid air.

17

Rain began to fall. Not heavy but enough to soak me and set me shivering with unexpected cold. Which was just what I didn't need at that point. I needed warmth, just to keep going. I walked on, trying not to think of the woman and her two boys and all the horrible things that can happen in this world. I felt vulnerable. Not from fear of an attack but, rather, from some deep and unidentifiable anxiety. I was a long way from anywhere. That didn't matter. What mattered was the fact that I was alone. Very alone! I'd never felt so alone.

The rain stopped and the clouds parted to reveal a near full moon. A flight of fruit bats, dark against dark, flew over. Frogs croaked from the soggy ground. Somewhere a curlew cried for the lost children of the night. Here and there, where the land opened up, or where it was too waterlogged to build on or for anyone to make any economic use of, shallow lagoons persisted. In the moonlight they were beautiful. I walked on, past fenced paddocks and tumbledown outbuildings of farms long past their economic usefulness. Trees gathered together in clumps beside sullen pools of water. Out in a paddock a lone weatherboard house stood high and lopsided on rotting stumps among untidy outbuildings. A flight of ducks headed south. At the edge of a creek an Egret, stark white against the black creek bank, jabbed at the shallow water. On the edge of a broad shallow lagoon a lone Jabiru stood like a statue in the moonlight.

Then the clouds came again and the moon disappeared and I felt, deep within me, that old irrational fear of the dark, a fear that we have largely lost because we have the choice, most of us, of whether to be out in the night or not. And if we do venture out it's in our car to some street-lit café or brightly lit indoor place where fear of the dark is the last thing on our minds.

The road ran on towards the darkening east like a lesson in perspective.

Halfway across the bridge over Tingalpa Creek I stopped and leant over the rail, peering down into the black void. Damp air rose from brackish water. My eyes adjusted to the dark. Light from some unseen source reflected off water. Tall trees lined the steep banks. On the far side of the creek a fluorescent lamp high on a pole

cast weird shadows across new mown lawn. An incandescent lamp illuminated the side of a public toilet block. It was a cold and uninviting scene.

I was about to continue on when a light in the sky caught my eye. I watched it trace a delicate arc up through the blackness until it lost momentum and, at the apex of its flight, exploded. Hundreds of little lights flew out, each on their own earthbound trajectories. The lights faded. I heard a muffled boom, followed by whistling sirens. Fireworks! From somewhere unseen came the sound, very faint, of cheering.

More rockets followed. Light and sound! Rockets shot skywards, exploded, into bright light. In that brief moment, as the lights rained down all colours, I saw, out of the corner of my eye, something move on a bench near the toilet block. It was a newspaper flapping. Then it was dark again. Leaving an afterimage. And a conviction that there was someone under that flapping paper. Then came a great explosion of light. The grand finale! In that brilliant light I saw, on the bench by the toilet block, under a pile of newspapers, a prostrate form, head protruding from one end. Patterns of reflecting colour flickering across dead grey flesh.

The fireworks finished. White smoke drifted into black night. From somewhere, faint and far away, came the muffled sound of cheering. Then all was quiet. A car emerged from a side street, turned onto the main road and came towards me, lights on high beam. It passed, rumbling across the bridge. A pickup truck went by, buffalo horns strapped to its bull-bar. A car hauling a horse trailer went past. I walked on. In the town two men emerged from the front bar of a pub, lit cigarettes, looked briefly at me, tossed matches aside and walked away, cowboy boots scuffing the footpath. A poster on a shop window proclaimed the Capalaba Rodeo.

I walked on. On the outskirts of town I came upon a used car lot. Behind the newer cars floodlit at the front, at the back of the lot and out of the light, I saw a kombi van. I went up to it and tried the sliding side door. It opened! Inside was a narrow bed. I was desperately tired. I glanced around. No one! I climbed in and lay down on the bed. Light, filtered through mosquito netting, entered through the pop-top roof. An hour's rest, I thought to myself, enough to recover before moving on.

But sleep didn't come. Images from the road swirled inside my head. I thought about where I'd come from, not just on this walk, but all that had led up to it. That old saying of my father's came back to me; 'There but for the grace of God my arse…' He hadn't meant that it was the derro's fault but, rather, that derros were the result of an uncaring society. Maybe it was some hang-up from the Great Depression, which he had experienced. It must have affected me because I often wondered if, one day, I might become a derro. And wasn't I one just then, lying in that van, a smelly outsider seeking opportunistic shelter, a lone man out in the midnight lowlands.

I worried that at any minute some burly security guard with a bright torch would come along, demanding that I move on or, worse still, call the cops to deal with yet another derro. But the bed was too soft and I was too tired to get up. I woke to find a figure standing in the doorway, silhouetted by soft light. I tried to focus but the light was all wrong.

"Hello Will," a soft voice said from the door.

It was M, my old lover, looking ghostly in the dim light. I tried to find words but couldn't. I struggled to rise but something held me down. The light was weird but I could see her clearly now.

"Well" she oozed in that old familiar sexy voice, "aren't you pleased to see me?

I tried to say something.

"Cat got you tongue," she murmured as she stepped into the room. She came over and sat on the side of the bed. So lightly she sat I hardly felt her.

"Well?' she repeated.

"I'm going home," I mumbled.

What the fuck did I say that for?

"And where is that?" she smiled.

I didn't know. The phrase kept going round in my head. 'I'm going home,' it said. I had no idea what it meant.

Mary Wright got up from the bed, went over to the door, closed it and turned to face me. I could see her clearly now. She was wearing high fashion

expensive clothes. God she was beautiful. Always was; right from primary school. The biggest prick-teaser in the school she was. And I was always her main victim. She began to undress, looking at me slyly as she did. The first thing she did was to remove her gloves. Why was she wearing gloves? Indeed, why was she dressed like she was? She threw the gloves aside then took off her hat. Why was she wearing a hat? I was confused. Then she took off her shoes.

"Are you happy Will?" she asked.

I couldn't find words.

She smiled. "You never were really happy were you Will?"

She undid the buttons on her blouse, slowly took it off. She had on a black bra. Tiny it was, firm breasts bulging out. She took off her skirt and threw it to me. I let it fall across my body. She stood there in her bra and tiny black pants.

"You always were a devil Will. Always expected me to make the moves. "What do you want me to do now?"

I looked at her. She looked down at me. "Hmm, " she said in a husky voice, "You seem interested.

I was naked, cock poking up hard. It felt good.

"Are you ready,' she asked.

Before I could answer she slopped off her underwear and came across to me. I watched her come. Ages it took, walking across that vast space between us, slowly coming towards me.

Then she was in my arms and we were together, my cock harder than it'd been for years, hot against the cool smoothness of her.

I came in a flash of blinding light.

Fuck! A torch flashed just outside the van. I lay there, sticky mess between my legs. The light outside flashed this way, then that. I lay there stiff as a board (well, not all stiff), hoping to hell the security guard out there with his powerful torch wouldn't check the van too closely. He'd see me. Then what? Fortunately I had I closed the bloody door. Fortunately I was dressed. I waited breathlessly. Boots came crunching across the gravel towards the van. They seemed rather big boots! Shit! I eased out of the bunk and onto the floor and waited. How stupid was

I! The torch flashed, came closer, torchlight on the windows of the van. So bloody bright! Surely he'd see me? But the light moved away. The sound of heavy footfalls across the gravel faded. I waited. I heard the sound of an engine start and a vehicle moving away. I breathed a sigh of relief. After a few minutes I rose and gingerly peered out the window. No one! I grabbed my backpack, snuck out of the van and set off for the road.

18

I walked on through the dead hours, dog-tired, fighting off hallucinations, every bone and muscle aching. The rain had eased into a light drizzle, which felt colder than the earlier rain. After so many hours on the road all I wanted was a warm bed of my own. When you're in such a state simple things can assume frightening proportions. Movements can be magnified, sounds become difficult to pin down. Out on the dark flatlands there were times when, out of the haze of hurt from all those hours on the road, weird images formed before me, times when it seemed that I had entered another dimension, one where nothing of substance dwelt. There were times when black space prevailed and I shrunk into myself, partly to counter the hurt of limbs and muscles and partly to ward off those queer images of the night; images that came uninvited, enveloped me for a moment then went away. Leaving a hollow feeling.

That's what it was like when, from out of the dark and drizzling rain, I heard a sound that worried me. I tried to shut it out but the sound persisted, getting all the time louder. I imagined a pack of mad dogs raging across the lowland swamps, bounding across paddocks, racing through the night, hunting teeth barred, lips curled back, chests swelling, tongues dripping saliva, canine monsters going fast across the earth, crossing creeks at single bounds, howling mad dogs under a furtive moon, coming towards me, alone out there and not a car in sight.

The dog sounds passed, their howling calls gathered in by the night. Only to be replaced by another noise. There were crazy out of control machines out there, trundling through the rural blackness on rattling caterpillar treads, mechanical monsters devouring the land and all that was on it, coming towards me, huge exhaust pipes belching black smoke, rattling and clattering, getting closer and closer.

I quickened my step against the absurdity of it all, shaking off the terror that, for a time there, threatened to engulf me. Only to be confronted by an odd cackling sound. At first it sounded like many voices, but this was no hallucination. Through the drizzling rain, in a dark paddock off to the side, was a building all lit

up, as if hosting a late night (early morning, really) party; people half drunk or stoned, cackling away the way they do at parties. But as I grew closer I saw that it was no human party but, rather, a lamp-lit colony in a vast wire cage open to the wind; a thousand white chooks cackling away on a never-ending twenty-four-hour shift.

My parents had chooks. That was in the days before chicken shitless yards covered by vast concrete slabs upon which were erected enormous houses that resembled warehouses. Our chickens had a pretty good life and ran free much of the time. Some were pets with minds (albeit small ones) of their own. I looked over the paddock at the wire cage and those white half-plucked chooks crammed into small mesh boxes with no room to move and wondered about existence. The phrase sentient being came to mind. I wondered what it really meant. Something to do with consciousness I guessed; the ability to sense beyond the self. Our chooks were sentient beings to some degree, at least during daylight hours (when darkness fell their small brains shut down and you could pick them up all limp). I wondered about the chooks in those cages. What did they feel? A few days before setting out on my walk I'd pulling up along side a large truck at the traffic lights. It was carrying hundreds of boxes in which were jammed white chooks. I guessed they were off to slaughter. The same day I passed the same truck going the other way. The cages were empty apart from feathers and the occasional foot. The world is cruel. There are people who are not much better off than chooks, like the beggars of India with their amputated hands and blinded eyes begging their way to early deaths. How do they cope? Does the mind shut down past a certain point of pain or suffering?

I was struggling in a different way, going on through the cool damp air, longing for heat; the hot feel of sun on my body. After so many miles and the consequent pain of limbs unused to such extended use I felt miserable. I tried thinking of pleasurable things, just to keep going against the road. I began to feel sorry for myself. It wasn't the thought that I might not make that last stretch to the shore. It was deeper than that. It didn't bother me that no one - apart from Billy Drahaam and the blokes back at the Empire - knew what I was doing. Being alone

wasn't new to me either (most people are alone at least some of the time I guess). What was new was a disturbing hollow feeling, one that persisted, deep down, beyond the superficial pain and tiredness. Was this depression? And why should I feel it so strongly. It wasn't as if anyone was forcing me to do what I was doing, or that there was no end in sight. It wasn't as if, for much of the time, I wasn't actually enjoying myself. I was still making occasional (damp) entries in my journal, which maybe indicated a certain forward thinking. But right then, at that low point in my journey the sense of depression was hard to shake off.

Then, out in the darkness way ahead I saw a light glowing faintly in the drizzle; a warm yellow, magical light that drew me on. It was only a street lamp high on a wooden post. A yellow sign said bus stop 34. Rain and the circling moths softened the glow of the bare lamp. It was beautiful!

I sat on a wooden seat beneath the lamp, too tired to care about the wet, gazing out into the nothingness of that black night. After a while I realised that I was not alone. In a semi-circle in front of me, gathered together as if waiting to hear a story, were six cane toads. Somewhere in the background an owl hooted. I looked at the toads. Painted differently they would have been at home in some gnomic garden.

But they were not friendly gnomes. They were squat and ugly. There was something arrogant about the way they sat, something almost ferocious about their demeanour, sitting there staring up at me unblinking like they might sit forever. I looked into their faces. They were ugly, seemed to have absolutely no feeling, no real awareness of what was around them apart from whatever could make a meal. They were creatures totally and utterly devoid of imagination, hated by everything other thing that walked or crawled or hopped about the surface of the earth.

I looked at the cane toads looking up at me and muttered, "So, fellow invaders, here we are. Waiting. For what? A meal? Some warmth? Someone to tell us it's all right? That it's OK we're here?"

The toads sat as if expecting more. But I had no more to say. I shifted slightly on my seat, causing minor consternation among them. They propped, then, sensing no danger, stayed. Like solid things they were. Indestructible.

"Well," I asked the toads, "have you no answers?"

Of course they had none.

I looked up at the circling moths. Why were they so beautiful and the toads so ugly? A moth got too close to the light, sizzled and dropped. A toad pounced. Was it their fault that they were so ugly? I wanted to kick at them. I hated them. I lurched forward, shouted, "Fuck off!"

They moved then, their small brains alerted to unspecified danger, hopping in all directions, a pandemonium of fat warty brown bodies, powerful white thighs glinting in the light, hopping plopping out of the light's circle. The circling moths, startled for a moment, flew out, only to return to their circling. I rose from my wet seat and walked away. In the east a faint glow spread across the sky. Dawn was coming.

19

A faint light etched across the eastern sky. The rain had gone, the air felt fresh and clear, with a whiff of sea wrack.

I continued on towards the outskirts of Cleveland, passing by an old motor garage, a relic from the days before self-serve: clutter of galvanised iron sheds, PLUME motor oil sign like a faded fresco on one wall, out front a broken hand-painted sign, equally faded, proclaiming 'Bob's Motor Repairs'. In the pre-dawn light that garage reminded me of those sentimental Darcy Doyle paintings my mother had hanging on the dining room wall; retrospective images of the 1920s with ancient houses, ancient cars, motor garages with hand-pump bowsers and dirt streets where children played cricket. But this Bob's wasn't a working garage. The pumps were dry, displaying prices from another era. Weeds sprouted from the driveway. Another failed business, another site ripe for redevelopment. Leaving that old garage behind was like leaving the past behind.

The road doglegged then straightened into the main street. After the darkness and untidiness of the lowlands the well-maintained streets and carefully tended gardens of the town felt civilised and welcoming. I quickened my pace, walking along the grassy footpath beneath flowering poincianas, their dark flat-topped shapes mysterious in the pre-dawn light. A paper delivery truck passed by. A dog ran along the footpath, giving me a wide berth. A street lamp flickered then died. A man unlocked the front door to a grocery shop.

I walked on through the high street to the old part of town. This was the Cleveland I remembered from childhood: a village from another place and time, with ancient-looking houses beneath huge shady figs, a pub with hanging plants and English gardens and solid woodwork and lace-like ironwork, an old pine-clad courthouse on a rise above the shore and the smell of the sea in the air. Cleveland was different from anything within coo-wee of Brisbane. Even as a child I could see that. For the moment at least, this part of Cleveland retained that otherworldly charm.

I walked on past the courthouse and onto the narrow spit that reached out into the bay. Small waves lapped the rock wall of the exposed side, sending occasional little spumes of salt water onto the path. On the other side, in the sheltered cove formed by the spit, the waters were quiet. At the end of the spit I found a seat in the park near the old lighthouse and sat watching the sun rise slowly from behind the long dark silhouette of Moreton Island. The surface of the water was still. Nothing moved. Until the moment of the cormorant, which shattered the dawn stillness in a swift dive. Gulls called then. Black swans, pelicans and other sea birds, way out on the mudflats beyond the furthest mangroves, moved silently. Figbirds called from nearby trees. A Brahminy kite hovered in the sky above me for a moment then wheeled away.

In the early morning light the bay shimmered. Way out at the eastern rim of the bay Minjerriba and Moongulpin (how much more romantic those words seemed, in that early morning light, than the English nominees Stradbroke and Moreton!) looked like two great whales resting, as if waiting for some signal to move north. Moongulpin would go first. Minjerriba, great chunks of her skin taken out by the sand miners, would then ease into her escape, swimming off into the deep blue Pacific, leaving a great gap through which the waves of the open ocean would come, obliterating the low inner islands and, unimpeded, pound the coast from Woogoompha to Caloundra, rendering it one great sandy shore devoid of the mystery and complexity of islands and mangrove coves and mudflats and tidal creeks and all the other places that gave the bay its wonder. And the port of Brisbane would be pounded and the airport would be submerged and all the memories of the bay would mingle with the sands, to be deposited, all mixed up and ill-sorted along hundreds of miles of coastline.

"Morning!"

It was Billy Drahaam, calling across the water from the bow of an approaching dingy, Roger McGuinn at the tiller, outboard chugging.

"Great day," Roger shouted, as he eased the tiny craft in to the shore.

Billy Drahaam stepped into the shallow water and held the dingy.

"You made it then," he said as I stepped aboard.

"Oh, Ye of little faith Bill. But, yes, I made it. Just!"

"Rough was it?" Roger asked as we set off.

"There were moments," I mumbled over the roar of the outboard speeding towards a large sailing boat I assumed was Roger's ketch.

It was weird; I was sitting in a bouncing dingy in the bright light of the bay but the nerves in my legs (or was it my mind) were active, as if wanting to continue what they'd been doing all those miles.

"Welcome aboard my humble launch," Roger beamed as I clambered off the dingy and onto his ketch.

"Nice boat," I offered.

"Bit the worse for wear," Roger replied, "but she's seaworthy. Takes me most places I want to go. Won't use the sail," he said, "not far really, and no breeze to speak of anyway."

We dropped anchor off the northwest corner of the island, clambered back onto the dingy.

"One of my favourite places," Roger said as we stepped ashore at a small sandy cove. "Lots of history here," he continued as he led Billy Drahaam and me along an old walking track that led through thick bush to a clearing containing several small buildings in various states of repair.

"The old leper colony," Roger informed us. "Operated here from 1907 until 1959. Introduced into the goldfields by Chinese workers. Leprosy that is. Or so they claimed. Spread to Aboriginal people, then to whites. Got so bad the Queensland government introduced the Leprosy Act in 1893. The first lazaret was attached to the Benevolent Asylum at Dunwich, but that caused problems and the lepers were moved here in 1907. First multi cultural community in Queensland: Chinese, Aboriginal, European and Australian born whites, all living together."

"In perfect harmony," snorted Billy Drahaam.

"Bill's been here with me a couple of times." Roger explained. "Heard it all."

"As if any of it matters anymore," Bill moaned.

"Becoming a bit of a cynic aren't you Bill? Anyway, you're right; things were pretty rough for all the inmates. There were four compounds: one for white males, one for white females, one for coloured males and one for coloured females. Apparently there were 86 inmates and thirty staff at one stage and…"

"What's that," Bill shouted, interrupting Roger's history lesson.

We turned in time to see a small furry animal disappear into the bushes.

"Wallaby," Roger answered. "Two species on this island. Which is odd, given its distance from the mainland. Could've swum here I suppose."

We sat on a log in the shade of a tree at the edge of the clearing. Bill hauled out a thermos from his bag, poured three cups of strong hot coffee. It was my first proper coffee for some time and the caffeine hit hard. My head was abuzz. Roger and Bill were chatting away about previous expeditions to the island but I was away, my mind in another place. I'd overstretched myself on that walk and felt quite emotional. In that quiet setting, with the sun shining and bees buzzing I had the odd sensation that I was so light I had to fight to remain grounded. So many hours on the road and now I was in a strange place full of ghosts!

Roger was saying something to me. At first I didn't respond, so immersed was I in my own weird world of fatigue, but Bill prodded me, told me to snap out of it. He'd done this on many occasions over the years whenever I'd drift off into my own fantasy world; had done almost from the time we'd first met at primary school. 'Into one of your space travels Will', he'd say.

Roger was asking me a question. What he'd asked was why I'd taken the route I had. I told him that I was going backwards in time, retracing the path of a part-mythical character in a book I was writing.

"He's always been like this," offered Billy Drahaam, my so-called best friend. "Has these strange 'episodes', he does. Comes up with gobbly-gook no one can understand."

Billy Drahaam glared at me. I shrugged. I was in no mood to respond, which, between us, was a pretty common response. I usually won in debates between him and me. Now I just felt, well, fucked!

Roger, however, insisted in pursuing the issue.

Who, he wanted to know, was this character, and what was the book.

I could see that he was interested. As an historian he would always be on the lookout for publications relating to history. Even in my continuing fog of after-walk, I knew that!

I told him that my character was a boy who'd journeyed from Minjerriba to a bora ceremony at Kupidabin. Which, I added, was near Samford.

"I know that," he said, a little muffed I felt.

"But," interrupter Bill, "there was a bora ring here on the island. Roger showed me the remains last time we were here."

I explained that it wasn't always the closest bora site that was used, that it depended on who was hosting the initiation ceremony and where the majority of neophytes were coming from, and that there were written reports, as late as the 1880s, of boys from Stradbroke Island going to the bora ground near Samford.

"Which is where you started this walk," added Bill." He stopped, considered something then added, "Which means you are kind of retracing his steps… going back in time."

This is what Bill did; he repeated ideas. Still, it was perceptive of him. Roger and I looked at Bill, both slightly stunned by this rare bit of insight. It was true. I had hoped that, by retracing what I imagined to be the route taken by my mythical hero, I might gain some insight into a world I did not understand.

"Bill's right," I added. "I'm going back in time."

"And space," added Roger.

Bill and I turned to Roger.

"Space," he repeated, "It's time *and* space, Will. You are transecting time and space."

Roger said he liked the idea, that maybe historians should consider such and approach. I reckoned some probably had.

"And where is the end place Will? You never told us exactly."

"There's a place out from Dunwich called Myora Springs," I said. "There's a midden there. I gather it used to be a kind of picnic area for the island people

before the arrival of the Europeans and their convicts. I'm hoping that by sitting down there I might..."

I stopped, not knowing how to finish, or indeed, what exactly it was I was trying to explain. Roger saw my dilemma, said that, in an odd way, I was doing what he was supposed to be doing as an historian.

"Take this place," he said. "Peel Island. I started to do a history of human settlement here once. Gave up. Pressure of other work and, anyway, others were doing it better. But I kept coming back. Bill came a few times. If you want history… this island has it in spades. It was a base for hunting well before the Europeans came and used it for what amounted to little more than a prison. For the Indigenous people of the bay – the Quandamooka people – there was turtle, dugong, shellfish…"

He went on about how, before the arrival of Europeans in Moreton Bay, which he insisted should be called Quandamooka, Peel Island was known as Chercuba and that the many middens on the island suggested it had been a great place for seafood, and that the remains of the bora ring suggested that the island was used for ceremonial purposes.

"Bravo, Roger," offered Bill. "About time someone," he continued, pointed at me, "gave him a lecture."

Roger laughed. I glared at Bill.

"That," continued Roger, "was before they erected the quarantine station. There were no more boras after that."

I knew about the quarantine station was. It was along The Bluff on the southeast corner and brought with it not just new arrivals, but cholera, typhoid, whooping cough, smallpox, measles, and consumption and the consequent deaths of many Aboriginal people.

"Run along military lines," Roger continued. "Accommodation for passengers and crew strictly segregated according to class, as it was aboard ship; saloon passengers in the larger building, officers' and doctor's in their quarters, steerage passengers and crew in tents. The ship's Surgeon Superintendent was in charge of discipline as well as the health of the passengers and crew. Terrible

conditions really. The barque *Southesk* was an example. Landed on 15th of May 1882, quarantined with 20 cases of whooping cough and several cases of Bronchitis. Four died from whooping cough."

"It was rough," he continued. "Poor buggers, come all that way for a new life!"

Roger paused. I could see that he was emotional, guessed there was another story there, maybe personal.

Billy Drahaam said he was hungry.

"Food's back on the boat, Bill," Roger said, clearly annoyed.

Bill got up, wandered off.

"Passenger's chests were opened on the beach," Roger continued after Bill had gone. "Contents exposed to the air. Clothes and blankets washed with carbolic soap, ship's fittings taken down and burnt, the whole ship limewashed and fumigated."

He took a swig of what must have been cold coffee, continued.

"By 1904 the station was closed and the buildings used to house 'inebriates' from the overcrowded Dunwich Benevolent Asylum. Land was cleared for grazing and crops: sweet potatoes, pumpkins, oats, barley, lucerne, Kaffir corn, cow peas… Oh, and Sisal Hemp for ropes. But the soil was poor and in 1916 the inmates were returned to the Benevolent Asylum at Dunwich and the wooden buildings demolished. Nothing much left apart from records. Meanwhile this place was built."

I looked over at the huts of the lazaret. They looked like an abandoned prison farm, or maybe concentration camp. I shuddered at the thought.

Billy Drahaam came wandering back, said he'd been doing the rounds of the buildings, said he thought the place would make a great tourist village, said he might sell his cab fleet, start up a tourist camp.

"You'll have to get rid of the asbestos first," Roger warned. "Then you'll need permission from about a dozen authorities, including the Quandamooka people before you could even begin."

Billy Drahaam thanked Roger McGuinn for his encouragement and went wandering off again.

"It'll happen," Roger said after Bill had disappeared. "Someone will turn this into a resort."

We sat in silence, Roger and I. The morning had drawn on to noon. It was time to go.

"Interned for life," he said. "Journey into oblivion!"

It was an odd response. I looked at Roger.

"Sorry," he said. "Just thinking about the people who were sent here. But you're right; we'd better be getting on."

But he didn't move. He started on about the history of the place, how leprosy came into Queensland with the Chinese influx to the goldfields and spread through Aboriginal and Islanders populations and how the disease became a threat to the white population and how, in 1893, the Government to introduce the Leprosy Act making Leprosy a notifiable disease and that those affected were segregated for treatment in designated lazarets.

"Like this one," I added.

"The first lazaret in Moreton Bay was attached to the Benevolent Asylum at Dunwich until it became unworkable. It was moved here in 1907. Funny thing," he mused, "but in a strange way it might have been Queensland's first truly multi cultural community: Chinese, Aborigines, South Sea Islanders, and whites. Housed in four compounds: white males, white females, coloured males, and coloured females. Whites and coloured women had individual wooden huts. Coloured men were housed four to a hut; corrugated iron on a cement slab."

Bill came back, said he'd seen enough, asked me if I wanted to keep going. Roger and I got up, stretched.

"Before we go," Roger said, "Let me show you around."

As we walked about the remains of what, on close inspection must have been a sizable village Roger told stories of inmates, including one about a troublesome woman called Rose Harris who solicited men in exchange for alcohol.

"She died in 1912," he added. "She was buried here," he added, "In the lazaret cemetery."

"There's another story," he said, "about heavy-handed officialdom. The lazaret wasn't a jail, although it might as well have been. Anyway, the authorities tried to make life bearable for the patients, like providing boats for them to fish the surrounding reefs. But some restless patients used the boats to attempt escape. In response an officer from the Health Department came over and burnt all the boats."

"The heavy hand of officialdom! Queensland politics hasn't changed much," Bill offered.

Roger continued babbling about the lazaret on as we went along the track towards the dingy, telling horror stories about the forgotten people of Peel Island and their fights for dignity. He told about a delegation to Canberra seeking a Royal Commission into the running of the place and after that conditions gradually improved.

"In 1947 the sulphone drug Promin was introduced," he added. "Patient numbers fell after that. In 1959 the place was closed down."

We stood on the beach beside the dingy; three men and a boat. I hadn't expected to visit Peel Island but was thankful that I had. It was one of those small places out of the main discourse of Australian history, but which said a lot about us, and where we'd come from.

This little island! This prison!

We beat across the open water towards Dunwich, main sail flapping in the gathering breeze, me at the back of the boat watching Peel Island grow smaller and smaller, Roger McGuinn telling the story, told in turn by his uncle one night at the dining room table when he was small enough to be awed by ancient men, of how the ghosts of lepers could be seen hovering on still nights above the spot where his uncle's father's boat went down close to the shore one stormy night in the Winter of 1914, wrecked while carrying supplies to the leper colony; a setback for the inmates who his great uncle Jock Campbell for supplies and gossip from the outside world, and a disaster for the family he'd brought from Scotland to Wynnum who were left to eke out a livelihood from whatever the bay could offer, selling

fish to the markets in the city, working in the shops and small businesses, prospered long enough to establish the working class suburb called Wynnum and how on certain foggy winter mornings you could sometimes see old man Campbell's boat, long after it went down, heading out past Peel Island for the wider, clearer parts where salt air and sea spray would dispel the awful curse of the lepers whose own souls were condemned to float like mirages across the inner bay.

And as the boat beat on I could see that ghostly boat drifting through a low winter morning fog and almost hear the cries of leper ghosts and those of long-dead convicts from St Helena.

A Sea Eagle flew over, calling its high-pitched call as it winged its way across the bay. A porpoise broke the surface not more than ten metres from our path. I looked about me. All across the bay I could see distant yachts, sails like moths. And I imagined I could also see, going the opposite way to us, two dark figures in a small canoe, a column of smoke rising between them, heading slowly and silently towards the mainland shore.

The ketch beat on through the jellyfish water into the deep clear channel off the island's lee shore. Dunwich loomed into full view, looking much as it always had: a row of wooden shops set back from the shoreline above a wide grassy paddock backed by wooded hills dotted with miner's houses. Like the old part of Cleveland, Dunwich seemed a survivor from older, less hurried times. Bill furled the sails, Roger started the engine and we eased into the old dock built by convicts back in 1825.

I stood on the dock watching the ketch sail away, Billy Drahaam's and Roger McGuinn's calls of farewell drifting over the water.

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As soon as I stepped off the boat I felt it; after all those years that same magical pull and call of the island. How to explain this feeling; this sense of having arrived at a special, maybe even a spiritual place? I wasn't alone in feeling this way. The word 'spiritual' would often crop up in conversations about Stradbroke, or 'Straddie' as everyone referred to it. None of us knew what we were talking about of course, but we did feel something each time we disembarked, whether that was from the long boat ride from North Quay or off the barge from Cleveland. During many weekends surfing The Point I came into contact with the island people and the more I did the stronger my feeling for the island grew. Back then there were no proper roads, just dirt tracks linking the villages of Dunwich, Amity and Point Lookout, but there were, I soon learnt, stronger link than roads between the people who called the island home.

They were a mixed lot those island people, carrying all sorts of ancestries and histories: descendants of the old Noonuccal and Noongie peoples mixed with descendants of convicts, descendants of whalers and beachcombers; these in turn mixing with workers from the sand mines and assorted dropouts and no-hopers from who knew what background. I got to know some of them through Saturday night sessions at the Point Lookout pub where, over any single night increasingly drunk layabouts would mumble incoherently into their beers and fishermen would tell tall tales of giant trevally and wrecks off the outer reefs.

There were, of course, those who didn't frequent the pub, exceptional people like the poet Kath Walker, who later changed her name to Oodgerro Noonuccal and who was once Australia's biggest selling poet. She lived in a humble wirrie at Moongalpa. That was her 'sitting down place'; a place she said carried the stories of generations of island people. In the hard years of Queensland politics, when no one from the Left was safe from the thuggery of Bjelke-Petersen's police thuggery, people like Kath Walker and her friend, the poet Judith Wright, stood up for civil rights, for racial equality and land rights.

Gratefully we learn from you,
The advanced race,
You with long centuries of lore behind you.
We who are Australians long before
You who came yesterday,
Eagerly we must learn to change,
Learn new ways we never wanted,
New compulsions never needed,
The price of survival.
Much that we loved is gone and had to go,
But no the deep indigenous things…

As I was walking up from the dock towards the town, thoughts of the island and its people going round in my head, a four wheel drive ute, barking cattledog in the back, slowed beside me. The driver, young, blue singleted, tattooed, friendly, asked if I wanted a lift. I thanked him, said I wasn't going far. He roared off, dog barking ecstatically. A loaded mineral sand truck lumbered past on its way to the waiting barge. The driver, also blue-singleted, flicked out a fag-end as he passed. What kind of life was his, I wondered: collecting a load from the sand dredge on the far side of the island, driving across the island to the dock, waiting there for the barge, an hour or more across the bay to the mainland, another hour or more to the refinery on the wrong side of the Brisbane River, then back again for another load. No air-conditioning and the cabin too noisy for the radio and just a fag for company.

A couple of kids crossed the road in front of me and chased each other over the grassy common. Dark skinned they were (many shades of dark really), and carefree in a way I never was! I wondered if they should be in school but I looked at my watch and, with a shock, saw that it was after three o'clock. School was out!

At the local café I ordered coffee and sat on the veranda gazing out over the common to the blue waters of the bay. Far to the west, beyond the mainland shore, I could see the blue outline of the western ranges from where I'd started this long walk. Two riggers in tattered blue singlets, boxer shorts and steel-capped working boots went in to the café, ordered cokes and doughnuts, came back out, offered a friendly '*g'day*' as they went on their way. A dark-skinned woman in a floral dress passed by, eyes to the ground, thongs slip slapping slow on the pavement. A bunch of children in school uniforms raced into the shop all excited. They'd just come off the ferry, returned from school across the bay. It would have been a long day for them: half and hour on the school bus and an hour in the ferry.

Dedication and a home on miners hill!

I finished my coffee and walked to the cemetery at the One Mile. It felt good wandered among the graves; peaceful despite the dreadful messages on the stones and crosses. Through the trees rising out of the ground that sloped down to the shore the bay sparkled. In the soil of this pretty place some eight thousand souls

lay buried, most of them former inmates of the Dunwich Benevolent Asylum. On a rise just in from the shore were twenty six small iron crosses in two parallel rows, dedicated to those who died from typhoid during the voyage from England on the *Emigrant*.

The story went something like this:

While passing the Cape Verde Islands off West Africa on 12 May, typhus fever broke out. The first victim died on 25 May and, by the time the ship anchored in Moreton Bay on 8 August sixteen people had died. Three more died before the ship landed at Dunwich. The rest died in the Dunwich quarantine station. Doctor Ballow, Resident Surgeon of the Moreton Bay Hospital and Coroner for the Brisbane district worked with Doctor Mallon in vain attempts to save as many lives as possible but conditions were appalling. One young patient, apparently deranged, ran into the sea and drowned herself. The ship's doctor, George Mitchell, endured prolonged suffering before dying on 15 September and Doctor Ballow died from the disease on 29 September.

Not far from the iron crosses was a large sarcophagus within which lay the bones of Doctor Ballow and, a little way up the hill, a memorial to those who'd died.

I'm not sure why but I copied out the list:

Joseph William Ball and Mary Anne Ball of London; Andrew Brimble, Elizabeth Brimble and son Samuel Brimble of Kingston, Wilts, England; infant girl Canning (born on board); Eliza Cummins, Queens County, Ireland; Hester Farmer, East Langton, Leics, England; Robert frith, Swineshead, Linc, England; Daniel Gorman, Tipperary, Ireland; Charles Hallett and sons Henry and James, Somerset, England; James Real, Palisgrain, Limerick, Ireland; Mary Anne Sallisbury and infant son, Somerset, England; James Synott, Somerset, England; Maria Tawbridge, Stratford, Wilts, England: Johanna Dwyer, Galway, Ireland; Elizabeth Wade, London, England; Thomas Coleman, Somerset, England; John Connor, Clare, Ireland; John Hector, Limerick, Ireland; George Huiston, Amagh, Ireland; Joseph Rowe, Somerset, England; J German (origin unknown).

Among the other graves I came across a simple earth grave with a wooden cross on which was written the words:

Violet: Uncrowned Queen.

Who was Violet?

As I stood looking down on that little cross a woman appeared. She was dark, aged about fifty I guessed.

"Mornin'," she offered, her voice soft.

"Morning" I replied.

She stood looking down on the grave with quiet dignity. I asked her if she knew who Violet was.

"Daughter of a chief," she said, as if that was all the explanation needed.

The old woman stood there by Violet's grave for what seemed ages, saying nothing. I felt drawn to the woman but didn't know what to say. Then, after a few minutes she silently drifted silently away. Leaving me alone to ponder the strange ways of the world and its history.

I walked away from that place, following what was then the only track out of Dunwich apart from the mining road. At the last house at the edge of town an old man with white hair and skin as black as coal was digging in the garden. The house was a small; fibro and wood set on low crooked stumps. From the veranda a woman called out, "Sid, bring in some spuds willya."

Then she saw me and smiled.

"Mornin!" she shouted cheerily.

"Morning, " I replied with a wave.

I caught her eye and, for just one fraction of a second we held each other's gaze. There was something familiar about that face, something about the way she carried herself. She saw my puzzlement and smiled an odd but not unfriendly smile before turning back into the house. It wasn't until I was some way down the road that I remembered who she was. She was Dulsie, the Noonuccal woman who played the piano at the Point Lookout pub back in my surfing days. Back then she

was a young, plump and happy woman who cleaned the rooms of the hotel by day and on Saturday nights joined in the merriment in the hotel lounge. She could not have known me. I was just one of many young men and women who filled the pub's lounge with noise on summer Saturday nights, leaning into the music and singing out of tune

On a wagon
Bound for market
There's a calf with a mournful eye
High above there's a swallow
Winging swiftly through the sky
Donna donna donna
Donna donna donna dooo…
Calves are easily slaughtered
Never knowing the reason why
Why don't you have wings to fly with
Like the swallow so proud and free
Donna donna donna
Donna donna donna do…

Dulcie was full of life and open to the world. Most of her people were like that. They were not a sad people, although they could have been bitter for all that had happened to them. They were people whose take on the world seemed devoid of rancour, whose outlook was more positive than most of the people I knew. I felt like going back, to talk to her the way I'd talked to those other people along the way, but I was beyond that and, anyhow, it didn't seem a good idea. I only thought it was Dulcie. Maybe I was wrong. If so, it'd be embarrassing.

I went on A little further on I came to the track that led down to Kath Walker's place. I stopped, recalling my first visit with a wry smile. That was early 1976. She'd given a talk in Brisbane, at the end of which she invited anyone in the audience to visit her. I took her up on the offer and went across to the island. The only problem was I didn't notify her that I was coming; simply walked in to her

Moongalpa home and introduced myself. I got bawled out rather severely for not phoning first. Having dressed me down she smiled and made a cuppa. We sat down and for what seemed ages she talked while I sat silently listening. Among other things she told the story of Moongalpa, which is printed in Kathie Cochrane's excellent book *Oodgeroo* (published years later in 1994 by the University of Queensland Pres).

There was once an elder of the tribe who was usually to be found near the tip of the island now known as Amity Point. When he was confronted with a difficult problem on which he had to adjudicate, he would walk south to a quiet piece of land near a swamp, and there would sit down to think the matter through in solitude. His name was Moongalpa, and this place became known as Moongalpa's sitting-down place.

I can't remember the details of that talk, but what I do remember is feeling very naïve. I was a young man of limited experience and little in the way of suffering in the presence of a very special person, one whose extraordinary life was tinged with sadness.

There's a passage in Cochrane's book, written by Judith Wright, that articulates what I learnt from that meeting in 1976.

It (Moongalpa) *is also a place to bring sorrows and problems. Kath is well versed in the difficulties Aborigines have with white officialdom, in getting such rights as are theirs and in knowing how to go about it. Personal problemscome to her, too, and often talk goes on most of the night.*

But above all, Moongalpa is a place to relax, away from the hostile and critical eyes of white people, in a place Aborigines can feel their own. The far-off lights of Brisbane are muted by the trees, and people can be themselves, acting out their real lives, singing their own songs, laughing and dancing, miming and learning, and talking freely.

It is a place, too, where white people can begin to understand as they never otherwise could, what it is to be Aboriginal.

Maybe there's some poetic licence in that passage (I never saw such things at Moongalpa and I know, sadly, that not everyone on the island agreed with

everything Kath Walker tried to do) but the spirit is there and, writing as I am now, all these years later, I cannot help but think that that passage captures better than I ever could what I felt at the time.

My second visit to Kath Walker's 'sitting-down place' was the following year and I'd gone with friends to help Kath Walker implement some of her ideas concerning the place as a cultural centre that also spoke for the ecology of the island. What I remember most about that occasion was being directed by Kath Walker to install epiphytes on the native pines that dotted the grounds. I don't recall much of the conversation during that visit but, once again, I refer to Kathie Cochrane's biography of the poet (who had by then changed her name to Oodgeroo), which articulates, better than I ever could, how much Kath Walker/Oodgeroo was an inspiration to others, and how she fought the fight for human dignity and equality against a backdrop of personal tragedy.

Kath Walker's Moongalpa was on the site of the old Myora Mission, established in 1892. The name proved contentious.

I pulled out the binder of notes and scraps of information I'd brought with me, most gleaned from sources in the Oxley Library. The first read:

In 1983 Mr W. Balliston, the mission school teacher wrote from Peel Island to the Department of Public Instruction to advise that the new school be known as the Moongalpa Provisional School. Balliston was drowned off Peel Island before his suggestion could be acted on.

And another:

In 1922 mr P. L. Bensted, a teacher at the mission, also requested that the school be known as Moongalpa because it was 'the ancient native name of the encampment upon which the school stands, and as such has been known for countless generations.'

One, from Thomas Welsby's book *Early Moreton Bay*, read:

Moongalpa is the native name for Myora, and in conversation with the older inhabitants they don't fail to let you know that they prefer this name to the name of Myora. Why, I cannot understand, unless that it be that the latter designates no particular place, or tribe, or language – that is, to them – but it

means purely "mission", and as Myora was and at the present time of writing, is known as the "Mission Station", so it remains. Mary Ann knew the reason of my many recent visits to their home township, and told me in plain words, "please Mr. Welsby, write the name down 'Moongalpa', not 'Myora'".

On another, copied from a passage from a report by a man called Roth, Chief Protector of Aborigines, dated 1905, read:

....Although not under the regular auspices apparently of any church, it is know as the Myora Mission. I am unable to discover how the name Myora came to be subsequently applied. There is a population of upwards of fifty souls, of whom some forty-eight are more or less permanently residing there. Among them are five kanaka males married to four half-cast women and one full-blood Aboriginal; ten full-blood, and thirty three half-casts and quadroons…they are provided with a school, where I found twelve girls and seven boys on the roll…

The last, a quote from a local woman Rose Borey read, in part:

I never lived on the mission and as I was only young when the mission had closed down I can only remember my older sister, Bethel, taking us out to the mission to visit the cemetery. It was like a day's outing for us. We would take our lunch and have that at the Two Mile and then walk further out to the cemetery and stay there until late afternoon. We would clear the leaves from the graves. It became like a tradition to do this. The shells on the graves were put there by all the grannies.

In the early stages of my journey, particularly at the bora ground, I had indulged in certain flights of fancy, partly because what I was doing was in many ways an escape from an otherwise humdrum life, and partly because those 'imaginings' seemed to give more meaning, or depth, to the enterprise. But by the time I got to Moongalpa I was tired and near the end of what was really much more than a two or three day walk. I think I realised, as I walked away from Moongalpa towards Myora Springs, that I really was attempting something important and that I'd been too flippant in my approach. Which, unfortunately, was par for the course. I'd always gone into things in a half-baked kind of way and this journey was no exception.

Am I being too harsh with myself? I'm at the final stages of this recording of that journey. It's funny, but that is how I felt then as I walked on towards the end.

The wooden sign, half hidden in roadside weed, read *Myora Springs*. I turned off the road and followed the narrow path that led beside a clear freshwater stream beneath a canopy of rainforest leaves. Suddenly it was dark and cool. One hundred paces on the path opened to a grassy bank beside a tidal pool and I found myself blinking, almost blinded by the sparkle of sunlight on water. On a flat grassy bank beside the pool I unhitched my backpack and sat down. It was beautiful! The stream, filtered to near perfect purity through countless grains of sand and tinted a soft golden colour by quinine from melaleuca roots further upstream, tumbled over a low fall and mixed with salt water flowing in along a narrow channel through the mangroves. The surface of the water rippled: purple reflecting off gold. Play of opposites. Myora was a riot of colour and texture, of contrasting shades of light and dark. Deep green rainforest merged with olive green mangrove. Grey mangrove shoots patterned low tide mud over which small creatures hopped and scurried. A tiny Crimson Honeyeater flashed brilliant crimson against the dark leaves. On the far side of the pool a low mound of broken shells sparkled white against the tidal silt.

I had never been to Myora Springs before. In my early surfing days all I wanted was to get to The Point. Back then that meant a long and very bumpy ride in the old island bus along what was little more than a dirt track. Myora Springs was just a place along the way. Life was simple then. Catching waves in the morning until the surf chopped up, drinking in the pub with mates and various flotsam and jetsam, not caring too much about anything. But there were odd moments of reflection; moments when, after a morning's surfing, I'd stand on the wind-swept headland gazing out across the great heaving Pacific, mind drifting over the water to far away places. But there comes a time in life when there is no point in gazing out to wide horizons (or to broad generalisations); a stage of life when you learn to accept the limitations of the pool and the closeness of the forest that surrounds you; to begin to appreciate the detail of things. Like the wonder of

that Scarlet Honeyeater against the green leaves, or the passage of a grab through the mangrove shoots.

On a drift of sand across the far side of the pool the midden shells sparkled in the late afternoon light. There were middens all along the coastal shores and the shores of the upland lakes; mounds of seashells built up over generation after generation; mixed in with tidal silt and sand until time and tide weathered most to low mounds difficult to differentiate from their surrounds. I'd chosen this one because years ago one of the aunties, an elder of the Noonuccal tribe, had told me about it. She'd said it was special; not just the midden, but the whole place, said that it was a place of feasts.

The sun was sinking slowly westward. Tree shadows fell across the water. It was time to finish what I'd started. From the edge of the pool I stood looking down into the water, for some reason reluctant to cross just yet. There in the water, deep down, I saw something that startled me. Beyond my own reflection, through the water's shifting patterns, I saw ghostly forms swimming about in the depths. I felt giddy and, for a moment there, thought I might fall. This, of course, was absurd, for the water was little more than waist deep. Yet I hesitated, seeing the vision as a kind of warning. Be careful, the ghostly figures seemed to say.

I recovered my composure and was about to cross over to the far side of the pool when two boys came screaming into the clearing, saw me and stopped. I smiled as reassuringly as I could, stepped back and sat down on the bladey grass. My final rites would have to wait. The boys, reassured, stripped down to their shorts and ran yelling in to the water. I watched the boys at play. They were about twelve years old, dark skinned, fit and healthy. Islanders! They cavorted in the water, swimming up and down the pool then racing among the mangrove shoots, treading over the broken seashells of their ancestors. How much, I wondered, were they aware of their own history, and did it matter to them?

I reopened my journal and wrote: Let them be, for too soon their playing days will be over.

Beyond the boy's noisy play, somewhere out on the bay, beyond the last mangroves, came the wailing of an outboard motor. The sound got closer, then

stopped. For a long moment there was silence. Even the boys were quiet. Just when I thought that the boat had passed - that it was probably a fisherman out on the bay - a dingy appeared, its outboard motor softly chugging as it eased its way along the shallow channel through the mangroves. The thing drifted into the pool and stopped at the bank not far from where I sat. Two men and two women, all in their early thirties, stepped ashore, offering cheery greetings as they did. They were dressed in expensive casual clothes and confident in their manner. I hated them! The men dragged a large esky ashore while the women set a picnic table with plates and wine glasses over a white tablecloth.

Their good times hijacked, the boys put on their shirts and left.

I was annoyed. The picnickers obviously intended a long stay. I buried myself in my journal as a way of distancing myself from their rowdy bonhomie. I completed a series of sketches and a few pages of notes. The day drew on. Long shadows darkened the water. I began to wonder if they'd ever leave. But, maybe sensing that I was going nowhere, they repacked their things and piled into the boat, offering fond farewells as they went. The dingy disappeared into the mangroves, leaving a pall of blue smoke hanging. I imagined them on their way to some great white yacht moored out in the bay.

It was late afternoon. Tidewater washed over mangrove shoots. Midden shells sparkle in the late afternoon light; small birds called from the forest; crabs scurried across the mud. There'd be no more visitors this day. I stepped into the pool, which by this time was considerably shallower than it had been, and waded across. I stripped off my clothes and knelt beside the midden, my journal beside me. Everything was still. I dug with my bare hands into the earth between my knees, down through the sun-whitened top layer to the black silt beneath. I knelt there, staring down into the black hole between my knees, down into depths deeper than night. Everything was coming to a close. Carefully, slowly, I scribbled random notes on bits of blank paper torn from my journal and dropped them into the hole. They fell like little white moths into black night.

On one, in loose scrawl, I wrote:

I see an image, more a hazy field of movements really. Through this changing field of images come fleetingly familiar things, some pleasant and some not so pleasant, and across all this is a line like a tear through an old movie. The images come and go but the jagged line stays, ominous and threatening, always cutting the images. And then I see, more clearly, but in the blurred tones of an old photograph, a line of warplanes on a tarmac. And there is a sound which comes and goes. The sound of many far away and heavily laden planes approaching. Or maybe it's just the sound of the wind in the telephone wires. Or maybe it's the sound of the bull-roarer.

I looked at what I'd written, wondering where it had come from and what it meant. Then I remembered. When I was small, right at the end of the war in late 1945, I'd been taken to Eagle Farm aerodrome and had seen warplanes on the tarmac. I'd been impressed by those planes which, I found out later, must have been Lincoln bombers. The bull-roarer? I'd heard one at the Ekka during a demonstration by Aboriginal people.

I dropped the scrap of paper into the hole.

I continued to tear out bits of paper, jot down random thoughts on them and drop them, one at a time, into the hole.

On another piece I wrote:

my father moved
through dooms of
singing each morning
into each night
my father moved...

and dropped it into the hole.

I was finished. My journey was over. I filled the hole with sand and placed leaves and shells over it. No one would ever know.

End