

1	2
2	8
3	47
4	69
5	108
6	152
7	200
8	244
9	273
10	300
Postscript	321

1

He was found in the shade of a tree by Worrim Creek. People came and cast their shadows over the miraculous child, then, one by one, they went away, leaving him in the care of an old woman who, years earlier, had been found drifting on a raft out in the channel and adopted by the island people. The old woman wrapped the child in the softest tea-tree bark and took him to her camp on the far side of the dunes.

From an early age he followed the men on long hunting and fishing expeditions across the island. In this way he got to know bit by bit and in intimate detail all of the land that was the place of his people. It was a world of tidal pools and freshwater creeks, dark swamps and coastal rainforests and, high up on the great sand hills, fresh water lakes alive with fish. In the quieter bays along the sheltered western shore Dugong swam in the shallow waters amongst the sea grasses. These the people caught as needed. On the wild surf beaches of the ocean side there were ugaries that he learnt to gather with simple twists of his bare feet in the wet sand at the edge of the surf. There were fish and ducks and lizards and snakes and roots of swamp plants that the women gathered.

It was a world that provided for all his peoples needs.

He moved through this warm sea-closed land, hunting with the men across the high dunes and wading amongst the fish traps in the shallow bays. Bit by bit he learnt the names of all these things. He learnt to know dolphins by their given names and how to call them in to herd the fish into the shallow water so that the men could spear them. Other times he followed the women into their secret places, gathering roots and yams. He was alert and keen to learn and grew in confidence. He understood that the world could provide for all the things that his people needed. He saw beauty, like the sun going down over the bay at the end of a perfect winters day. But he also saw pain, like when women went pregnant into their own secret places and returned crying, wailing, childless. The world, he realised, was complex.

One day, in the twelfth year of his life the boy stood beneath the shade of pines near the shore, gazing out over an empty beach. Grey seawater lapped the shore. The sea merged with the grey sky. There was no horizon. It was a scene devoid of life, a humid stillness of sea and sky where nothing moved. The boy was about to step out of the shade onto the beach when he sensed movement. At the far end of the curving beach a thin dark shape emerged out of the haze. It was a white man, staggering along the beach, pushing hard against the soft sand and oppressive air. The white man continued on until, just there in front of the watching boy, he stumbled and fell. The white man lay on the sand, chest heaving.

What was he running from, the white man? Why was he out there on the hot beach? Even as the boy pondered these questions other figures came running hard along the sand. The boy had seen the soldiers guarding the convicts building the landing dock at the dolphin beach, had seen their wrath and been disturbed by the violent way they treat the convicts under their command. He was afraid. From the shelter of the bushes he watched as the soldiers closed in on the man who rose and stumbled on, his sun-darkened face wet with running sweat, distorted in fear. Just there he was, so close the boy could hear his heavy breathing.

Why did he not seek the shelter of the bushes? Why did he continue to stumble along out there on the open beach?

Twenty paces from the stumbling man the soldiers dropped to their knees and brought their long glinting rifles up to their shoulders. The boy watched in silence as the naked man tried to push on against the soft sand. But it was no use. The boy wanted to help the man, wanted to call out, 'come here old man, come into the safety of the trees'. But he dared not. Instead he watched in silent wonder as a puff of smoke came like a harmless little cloud from a gun barrel. Almost instantly the man arched backwards. Only then, as the man fell, did the boy hear the sound of the bullet bang and thud.

More puffs of smoke rose from rifle barrels and drifted to humid air. For just one moment the man struggled to rise. Then, with one last shudder, he fell to the sand and was still. The soldiers approached, cautious still. They were young, hardly more

than boys really, their faces already hardened to the desperation and disappointments of penal life. They stood over the body with no sign of pity on their faces. They were hot and angry, their sweating faces brutal. They swore and cursed and kicked at the useless bloody body, turning it over with their boots. And as the body rolled over its eyes, unseeing yet open wide in eternal fear, stared into the eyes of the young boy watching from the shadows.

Their rage vented, the soldiers turned and trudged back up the beach from where they had come. Leaving a blackened form lying like a stranded dolphin at the high water mark.

The only person at my birth, apart from my mother, was an old nurse who made excuses for the doctor. My father came later in his boilermaker's overalls, carrying the smell of the shipyards. He took us to a wooden house in Roseleigh Street and when it was time I was taken to St Andrews Church of England and christened Will Traverse. My name was recorded on a birth certificate that was kept, along with my baby book, birth certificate and various other legal documents, in a special drawer in my mother's dressing table, including a diary, which is how I came to know all this.

That house was full of people. There was my grandmother, a Treloar who, according to family mythology, had connections back to the British Royal Family (a bit of a joke for some, especially my father). There was grandfather Braithwaite whose connections were never discussed. There was Uncle Harry who was in the Army but who only got as far as Darwin because Singapore had fallen. There was Auntie Ruth and her husband Uncle Andy who was also in the Army. One of my first memories was waking in the middle of the night and seeing a light glowing through stained glass high up and far away. People were moving about in the half dark, heavy boots shuffling and someone behind a closed door crying. The boots were Uncle Andy going off to war, clumping down the front steps and fading away, leaving Auntie Ruth softly sobbing from behind the closed door of her room.

The house was one of a line of wooden houses on wooden stumps facing out across the street to the open expanses of Melrose Park. From the front veranda of each house wooden stairs ran down to front gardens of buffalo grass, beds of chrysanthemums and various flowering bushes, including two frangipani trees that lost all their leaves in winter. Along the northern side of the house was a line of mango trees that dropped their fruit onto the driveway and by the end of summer stank. At the rear of the house a narrow flight of stairs went down from a landing to the back yard. If I ever ran out of things to do there among the chook runs and banana clumps and hedges where giant grasshoppers lived, or among the cool bushes on the southern side where tiny shiny green tree frogs clung to red stemmed plants with their tiny red feet, there was always under-the-house where it was dark and cool and you never knew what you'd find among the cast-off furniture and packing cases and piled up discarded things from upstairs. Under-the-house there were big lazy wet green frogs in summer and dry brown lizards in winter. Sometimes after big rains under-the-house flooded and the bit that my father had dug out and cemented in for his workshop was like a swimming pool. Only the water was dark and scary.

For a time I was content to see that as my world. The back yard and under-the-house offered all that I needed and I never thought of a world beyond. Warm breezes from the northeast blew across Melrose Park and over the garden and through the front door and across the veranda and down the hall and through all the rooms and out all the windows. Which were always open. Except sometimes in winter when chill westerlies would blow down from the mountains, or on evenings of fierce summer storms. The house would be shut up then and I'd feel safe and cosy. Winter mornings I'd sit on the front veranda gazing out over the park while my parents read the papers. Far-away sounds of foghorns floated up over Albion Hill and breezes carried the calls of Butcherbirds piping through the crisp morning air. Magpies sang and pecked at park grass, parrots squawked from the trees and, later in the day, when the other birds were quiet and everything else was still, you'd hear the moronic caw of crows. Trams screeched round the corner into Kent Road and trains whistled out of

Eagle Junction Station. But, more than anything else, it was the aeroplanes droning in and out of Eagle Farm that I never forgot; sounds of the last years of the war.

In the summer of 46 my mother took me to Woolloowin State School and left me there to find my own way home. From that day until I was fourteen I went to school every day, walking along Kent Road past all the houses and all the dogs in all the yards, avoiding the Catholic kids who walked on the other side. Sometimes I'd play in the empty lot where two DC3 Dacotas left over from the war had been dumped. You could climb right in and sit in the cockpit and pretend you were flying. That was until someone came and made caravans out of them and drove them away. Soon after that a new brick house was built on the block and Mary Wright, who was in my class went to live there. I learnt that nothing could be taken for granted because one day on the way home from school Mary Wright said she'd give me a penny if I showed her my thing. I did but she laughed and said she didn't have a penny to give me and I went home feeling silly.

When I was about seven years old I went with my father to the fish markets at South Brisbane. I remember walking among the fishing gear and yelling fishermen to the wharf where, in the bright light of the riverside, I saw the *S. S. Koopa*, its giant funnels out of all proportion to the rest of the ship. I was fascinated. It was the first time I'd been close to a real ship. Black coal smoke poured out of the funnels. I wanted to stay, to take in the sight and smell of the thing, but my father pulled me away and we went through dark smelly sheds among fish offal and big hairy sweating men in shorts and blue singlets. As we were walking through one big dark shed a black man came veering drunkenly towards us, looking unlike any man I'd ever seen. It was not the blackness that frightened me but the unsteady list of the man and the crazed eyes that seem to focus on me. And as the black man came on, mumbling rude words that were forbidden in our house, as he closed in, there in the smelling fish sheds, my father's grip tightened and I felt fear. But the black man only held out his hand and a strange lopsided smile spread across his face. For a moment I saw, beyond the external dismay of filthy clothes and the dirt that lined his black face, a kind of recognition, of knowledge that might be shared. At that moment, as I struggled to

come to terms with whatever it was behind the ugly reality of the man's exterior, my father pulled me away. From a safe distance I turned to see two policemen hauling the cursing black man away.

2

All along the darkening skyline the cranes are still, their drivers gone for the night, leaving Eureka flags limp. The sea breeze that just moments ago had brought relief from the daytime summer heat has died away, as it always does these summer evenings. It's getting dark and the peak hour traffic has eased. Commuter trains whine out of Central Station, citycat ferries, less crowded than they were just moments ago, trail wide V wakes all up and down the river. Aeroplanes arc over the city, bound for distant places. In bars and restaurants across the city lawyers and accountants from the money end of town discuss business over drinks and nibbles. From wharves along Riverside tourists embark onto party-boats for another night of festivities on the river. Joggers, skateboarders, cyclists and pedestrians are jostling for space all along the tower-shadowed river boardwalks. In the darkening shade of parks and in nooks behind city churches homeless people are preparing their swags for the coming night. Office cleaners are easing their vehicles through streets vacated by daytime shoppers and office workers. It's not just the human tide that's settling for the night; crows are calling mordantly as they fly between buildings looking for last scraps, in the remnant fingers of forests all across this hilly subtropic city scrub turkeys scratch at their nests, from parks and back yards all across the city come the raucous dusk-calls of parrots and from bushes along the park fringes tiny birds chirp.

This is the best time of day, when the sun has gone down and it's relatively cool. I'd normally be out walking; taking in what this growing but still adolescent city has to offer from winding river walkways and shady parklands. Instead I'm driving slowly, and in some trepidation, towards an appointment with someone I haven't seen in ages.

I turn off Bowen Bridge Road into the hospital car park, collect my ticket, park the car, click the remote and head for the lift. At level 7 I get out and make my

way to the ward 7B. I stop at the entrance, looking in. There are four beds, one empty. For a moment I'm uncertain which of the three women is her. But then I see her smile. I go to her.

Ah, Will, she says with a wheeze I used to find sexy but which is now, well, wheezy. On time as usual.

That tongue of hers! Sharp as ever.

I glance briefly at the name on the ward sheet at the end of the bed. 'Mary Wright'. Only the person in the bed isn't exactly the Mary Wright I used to know. The woman on the bed looks old and tired. I sit beside her, aware of the other women in the ward looking at me.

You ok, I ask awkwardly.

Fine, Will. Just in for tests. Cancer. Bugger!

I say I'm sorry to hear that.

She shrugs, apologises for contacting me after all this time, says she's been thinking about me. I tell her I'm pleased to hear that, add that I think of her often, which is true. She smiles wanly (which is sad to see in someone so normally feisty) then fills me in on the details: breast cancer and some evidence of cancer in the kidney. She says the situation's not critical.

I don't like cancer; had too much of it in my own family for comfort. Had a bit of a scare myself a while back, but the last colonoscopy showed nothing. Hopefully I'm clear.

Sit down Will.

I sit and we chat about this and that. I ask her how she got my number. She says she ran into Billy Drahaam.

You've seen Bill! I ask, more than a little surprised.

Chance thing. Caught a cab a few weeks back. I was going to the hospital for a check-up. He was driving. Didn't know him at first and he didn't know me. It was only when he started talking that I recognised the voice.

Surprised to hear he's still driving, I say. Don't see him much these days. I thought he was retiring, thought he'd had enough of the taxi business (one of Bill's early ambitions was to own a fleet of taxi cabs; an ambition he in fact fulfilled).

Maybe, she says. Didn't say anything to me about that. We had a long chat. I asked if he'd seen you recently. He said he hadn't for a while but that you two kept in touch. He asked if I'd seen you. I said I hadn't. He said I should. He gave me your number. So, I thought, bugger it, I'll ring. And here you are.

Anyway, she continued, he told me you were writing a book. What's it about?

It's complicated, I say (for some reason annoyed Bill had told her). I guess it's a kind of history.

Maybe you can read some to me Will. I'll be here for a few days. Be nice if you can come again. Bring your book. Read to me then.

Won't run into that man of your's will I? (her marriage to someone else all those years ago still hits hard).

You will if you come tomorrow night. Come the following night. If you can! George will be away on business for a few days.

I know nothing about George, except that he's an ex-pilot she met while serving a stint as an airhostess (sorry, stewardess). He's not my favourite person.

I say I'm pleased to hear that, which isn't what I'd like to say.

After a while she says she's tired, that she needs to sleep.

I get up, bend down and kiss her lightly on the cheek.

You will come again Will, won't you?

I say I will.

Bring the book!

I find my car and drive through the city, wondering as I go what I've got myself into after all this time. There's this old thing between us, going way back to early primary school. God, that was sixty years ago! It's still there, the old attraction. At least it is with me.

Two days have passed and, as promised, I'm back in the ward. I hand her the flowers I'd bought from the florist on the ground floor. She thanks me, sniffs them, places them on her side table on top of some magazines.

The nurse will fix them, she says.

I ask her how she is. She says she's fine, that the prognosis isn't too bad and that she'll be out in a day or so.

Odd isn't it, she says after a pause.

What's odd, I ask.

You and me, together after all this time!

It has been a long time since we spent any time together. As for us being together, well it's hardly the 'together' I once wished for.

We chat for a while before running out of things to say. I sit beside the bed, wondering vaguely about what might have been.

Will, she says, interrupting my rather morbid ponderings, how about this book of yours. You said you'd read it to me.

It's not a book, I say, it's just a manuscript. And it's a long story. Sure you're up to it?

Don't be silly Will.

I shrug, dig the manuscript out of my backpack, open it and read to her about the boy being born and seeing the convict killed on the beach.

That's sad, she says. I can see the boy...

I'm heartened by this, ask if she'd like to hear more. She says she would, so I read on:

The boy stands on the hill above the shore watching the white men building the dock. Some of the men are in chains, their clothes ragged and heavy and covered in a dark arrow pattern barely distinguishable from the dirt that clings to the unwashed wool. Standing guard over the convicts are soldiers with long rifles. Close up the uniforms of the soldiers are only slightly less grubby than the convicts they stand guard over. The boy watches as the convicts trudge back and forth, carrying

rocks from a large wooden barge resting at the water's edge to the dock. With each load the dock reaches further into the bay. The boy has been watching this building for many weeks now, fascinated by a pattern of labour foreign to his people.

They are brutal men these soldiers. They flog the convicts and swear at each other. The convicts, reduced to almost inhuman state, utter savage oaths at the soldiers, and at each other. Their cries travel up the slope to the boy who does not understand the words but understands well enough their meaning. The language of these people is harsh, unlike the soft sounds that roll from the tongues of his people; it's as course and sharp as the sounds of the lash across the bare backs of convicts. The boy has seen savage fights among the men of his people but in their fighting there are certain protocols, the combatants are evenly matched and the fighting fair. The boy cannot comprehend the actions of these savage men, or how they can be so unfairly cruel to each other.

They have no women of their own these white men. Once, when the island men were out fishing, white soldiers out of uniform came into the camp and had their way with some of the women. The boy was there in the shadows, watching. He felt helpless and useless. When the island men returned from their fishing and learnt of this outrage they swore revenge. The day following the outrage they confronted soldiers exercising on a flat bit of land beneath the pines by the big swamp. But the white men raised their rifles and fired and two warriors fell. They did not stop then, as is the custom among the boy's people when one is badly wounded in a fight, but continued firing even as the warriors ran for cover. After that there was morose acceptance of the white man's power and a great lassitude descended on the people.

It's not just soldiers and convicts who disturb the tranquillity of the island. Whaling men come from different lands. Some - dark-skinned like the Manila man - settle on the island and mix with the island people. Over time the old people became passive onlookers on a changing world. Everything becomes mixed-up and uncertain. When one of the island women gives birth to a baby pale of skin and blue-eyed the island people know that their world has forever changed.

The boy understands that the people have lost their way. The older men have given in or no longer care. There are things the white men bring; things like tea and flour and other sweet things that the island people beg for. They stop hunting. The fish traps are neglected and the dolphins no longer come to herd the fish into the bay. The boy drifts into pubescent confusion, at times sinking into a deep torpor. Dark thoughts haunt his waking hours. He feels alone in the world and sees that the people have lost interest in him. He knows that he will soon pass the age of initiation and fears that he will not become a proper man. The older men of the island, among whom he might have found a guardian to lead him through the trials of manhood, show no interest in him. The days go by in slow procession. He grows more and more listless.

Time passes. Near the end of the thirteenth year of his life one of the elders - a sad old man who, in past days had a reputation as a fighter - comes to the boy and tells him that a warrior from the mainland has appeared among the people and has asked to see him. The boy goes to the warrior and stands quivering in fear and expectation before the old man who is tall and wise-looking and ancient, with great scars across his back and shoulders and a white bone through his nose. He is unlike any man the boy has seen.

The old man looks the boy over for what seems an eternity then turns to the gathered crowd.

This is the boy, he says.

And goes away, leaving the boy and the people wondering.

I look up from my reading. Her eyes are closed but I think she's listening. I'm not bothered anyway; it's the first time I've read my writing aloud and it feels good. I continue.

The sultry wet season gives way to clear sunny days of autumn. The boy takes to standing on the headland near his mother's camp, looking out across the bay towards the mountains of the mainland far to the west. He is waiting for the old man.

One day his mother comes and stands beside him. For a long time she stands there. The boy seems not to notice her presence and she does not interrupt his thoughts. Too often of late the boy has turned on her in frustration and she is careful lest he turn on her again. But this day she has an important message. The boy eventually turns and smiles wanly. For a while they stand together at the waters edge, staring out across the bay. When, eventually his mother speaks, it is with a quiet authority.

Tomorrow, she says softly, you will go with that old man.

Then she turns and walks away.

Early next morning, before the sun has risen, an elder comes to him and takes the boy to the shore where the old man stands waiting at the water's edge. With one hand the old man steadies a small bark canoe. It looks so small and fragile, bobbing on the waves with the great expanse of the bay behind. From a bed of clay in the centre of the canoe a thin column of smoke rises from the ashes of a fire. The smoke drifts into the air. Beyond the canoe the waters of the bay shimmer in the dawning light. The boy turns to the people gathered at the water's edge. Some are smiling, others are crying. His old adoptive mother is there. She is crying too, but at the same time looking proud.

She holds the boy for a moment then pushes him towards the old man.

Off you go, she says.

Seagulls whirl and squawk along the shore but they wheel and screech in vain for this is no fishing party. There will be no scraps. The gulls continue to whirl and squawk as the boy is helped into the canoe. They continue circling even as the old man steps onto the canoe and paddles away from the shore. A few persistent gulls follow the boat out from the shore but they too finally give up, leaving the old man and the boy to the silence of the bay.

The old man paddles slowly but purposefully through the still water. And as they go the boy's tight grasp of the gunwales loosens. He gains confidence, turns and looks back towards the shore. What he sees saddens him. The people who'd come to farewell him stand silently on the sand. From where he sits, in that small craft bearing him across the sea, they seem small and vulnerable. A little way up the beach

convicts in chains are unloading cargo from a small ship onto the newly completed dock. Soldiers with guns walk slowly back and forth. The contrast between the two peoples is stark. The boy shivers in fear of the future.

A Sea Eagle casts its shadow briefly across the little boat. The boy looks up, watches the magnificent bird wing its way over the water until it vanishes into the sea haze. From his seat, inches above the water, he looks about. The bay is vast. To the south it narrows into a complex pattern of islands and channels. To the north it widens and dissolves into a hazy horizon of watery air. The sky is blue, the sea a clear blue-green, the air fresh. Far away islands float insubstantial on the surface of this watery world. But what the boy marvels at is not the floating islands but a white sail far to the north. Like a moth it is, hovering over the water.

They come to a low island and drift westward along its southern shore to where a small stream bubbles across the sand. They stop here and pull the waterlogged craft up onto the beach to dry. The boy follows the old man to a low headland, stepping carefully over oyster shells and the sharp stones of an abandoned fish trap. At the edge of the trap, where the stones drop to deep water, they stop.

There, the old man says, pointing to a patch of weed, is Dugong.

Two shadowy shapes, one large, one small, drift through the waving fonds.

Murroo, the old man says, was from the north. One day she was breaking a coconut for her husband when she got some splinters in her eyes. She went into the water to wash them out. As she went the tide receded but she kept going. Further and further out she went. When she was a long way out the tide turned and she found herself unable to get back to shore so she went down into the sea and became a Dugong. But she kept some of her human form and still feeds her baby from her teats as every woman does.

Sometimes, the old man adds, you can see her crying out on the sea.

The shapes come closer. The boy sees the mother and calf.

See, the old man says, even now she is with child.

The Sea Eagle returns, notes the two humans at the edge of the fish traps and the shadowy forms of the Dugong mother and calf grazing in the sea grasses. But

these things are of little interest to the bird. It is more concerned by the changing pressure of the air.

The old man, attuned to nature as the bird, sniffs the air. There will be a storm later. But he does not communicate this information to the boy.

They sit on the beach beside the drying canoe, eating oysters collected from the traps. Dark tree shadows fall across the sand. A fresh breeze blows from the south. A gull struts past, its shadow following like a disconnected thing, arrogant as the bird itself. The boy follows the bird's progress as it heads towards a shape at the waters edge. It startles the boy, that shape, reminds him of the body of the white man on that other beach and how the man had appeared out of a summer haze that blurred the boundaries between the substantial and insubstantial. On that sultry day the shadows of trees falling across the sand seemed insubstantial and hazy, but here on this south-facing beach the shadows are much sharper. Everything is in clear focus, including the faraway tops of trees. The boy ponders this phenomenon for a while before turning his attention back to the pile of weed. Despite the clarity of the air it assumes the form of unwanted dreams, becomes an evil presence that threatens the boys grip on reality. The gull strides to the weed pile, pecks briefly at it then continues on along the beach.

They carry the canoe along the sandy shore to the western tip of the island. From the top of a low dune they gaze out across the water to the mainland shore. It seems a long way off. Dark rain-clouds above the ranges far to the west foretell rain. The breeze has dropped. The air has cooled. Everything is still, the way it often is before a storm. The old man looks to the sky as if expecting a sign from some higher power. For a long time he stands there. Then, his mind made up, he pushes the boat out.

That's taking a risk, she says, interrupting. But she's right, there are many who, in vessels far sturdier than this flimsy canoe drifting slowly towards the mainland shore, have miscalculated the conditions of the bay and come to grief. Sparkling morning, when the water is like glass and there is not a breeze to be felt, can turn suddenly into a thunderous afternoon, the air heavy with dread. At such

times the bay can become a raging cauldron. They happen quickly these changes. Those of us who've experienced such changes, as I have, would fear for the boy and the old man going slowly across these unpredictable waters.

Sorry for interrupting, she says.

I shrug, continue the story.

Half way across that last stretch of open water the wind starts up. It whips the water, sending salt spray over the little craft. The fire hisses and goes out. The old man curses. The boy grips the side of that flimsy piece of sinking bark as the water laps with increasing ferocity. He can smell the approaching rainstorm. Lightning flashes and thunder claps but the old man continues, driving the craft slowly shoreward, the tiny craft sinking deeper into the water as they go. The old man turns. The boy follows his gaze. Away to the northeast he sees the Quandamook coming their way, gathering strength as it comes, spinning slowly but frighteningly across the bay. The boy watches the great dark column of water grow ever thicker and ever higher. He is fascinated by the power of the thing. The old man, too, seems mesmerised. He stops paddling, as if waiting for the thing to come and draw them into its vortex. But the Quandamook turns south and spins wildly away. The old man renews his efforts and they go painfully, slowly, towards the mainland shore.

From the tip of a low spit of land barely distinguishable from the rapidly darkening shoreline, two men stand watching the drama unfold. They had silently urged the old man on ahead of the increasingly ominous column of water but even now, the Quandamook gone and losing strength, they continue to urge the old man on. The old man drives the pitiful craft forward until it strikes a mud bank and stops. He climbs out of the sodden craft and goes sloshing shorewards through the shallow water, the boy trailing disconsolately behind.

The old man stops. The boy looks up. Standing before him are two fierce-looking men. They stare down at the quivering boy even as the sea rages behind and the sky growls above. Such is the boys welcome to the mainland. He stands shivering on that shore as the three men walk off a short distance and confer in earnest

whispered tones, every now and then casting glances back towards the waiting boy. For ages he stands there, at the end of that narrow spit, wondering what the men are discussing and why they seem so displeased. He has never felt so alone, has to fight back tears lest they think him weak, summoning up what courage he can, knowing that back there across the water he has left behind a childhood he can never return to, while ahead lies a future even now being determined by men he does not know.

The men stop talking. They stand for a moment, as if uncertain. This bothers the boy even more. They now approach the trembling boy. He steels himself for their reproach but they look upon him kindly. The two strange men put their arms gently on his shoulders and utter something in a language the boy does not comprehend. But they are smiling. The boy looks to the old man. He too looks pleased. The boy is humbled by these signs of encouragement and casts his eyes down. When he looks up the strangers have vanished. The boy looks to the old man for explanation but the old man shrugs and signals for the boy to follow him.

They go into a dense bush. Within the bush is a small shelter made of sticks and bark. The old man tells the boy to enter and he crawls in. Inside is a bed of soft grass. The boy lies down. He is tired. Through the shelter's opening he sees the old man sitting by the fire, firelight playing on his craggy face. There is strength in that face, and in the very bearing of the man. The boy is comforted by the knowledge that he is in good hands and falls asleep.

He struggles through dreams. In one dream strange birds and fish swim through opaque skies. In another a great fire burns, sending flames that followed him as he runs. He wakes in a cold sweat to find the morning sun beating down and the old man kneeling over a small fire, poking at the ashes with a stick. The smell of cooked fish wafts out, whetting the boy's appetite. The old man looks up as the boy emerges from his shelter and smiles. It is a reassuring gesture.

Eat, the old man says, indicating some fish laid out on a piece of bark, for we have far to go.

I stop reading.

Keep going Will, she murmurs through closed eyes. I'm listening.

I make a few quick edits to what I've just read and continue.

From the top of a rise just in from the shore they look back over the bay they have just crossed. The old man begins to tell the story of the bay, pointing out as he does features of significance to the old people. But the boy's attention is drawn to something altogether different. Way out there, between the strait that separated the two great islands that form the eastern limits of the bay, is a ship. It's not like the sailing ship he saw during the previous day's crossing, nor is it like any of the white men's boats that he'd seen visiting the island. This ship is big, and from it a column of dark smoke rises into the clear air. The old man and the boy watch the thing slide slowly but inexorably across the water. And as the ship comes on, paddlewheels churning the water, it draws a line across the bay.

And the boy knows that it is a line that separates the past from the future.

They turn to go but a flash of light catches the boy's attention. The ground upon which they stand has recently been cleared and in the centre of the clearing is a small round shiny object. The boy bends to pick it up but it is firmly embedded in the rock. He looks up at the old man.

White man's mark, the old man says brusquely, and walks away from the surveyor's peg.

They go down the hill and through a low swamp, easing their way through tangled undergrowth and muddy flats where mosquitoes are so thick they have to cover their bodies with tidal mud. On and on they go through this dark swamp of shifting shadows until eventually they emerge onto higher, firmer ground. They continue across slightly undulating country until they come to a great body of glistening water covered by brightly coloured flowers. The old man stops. On the far side of the lagoon, on a bank of low grass beneath the overhanging branches of a swamp oak, stands a magnificent black and white bird. It is unlike anything the boy has seen. It stands on one leg, just like the old man sometimes does.

The boy points to the bird and asks its name.

Jabiru, says the old man. It is from the north. A visitor. This is not its country. It's like me, the boy thinks, a traveller in a strange land.

On the water are birds of many kinds, but the old man's attention is concentrated on a lone black duck feeding near rushes not far from where they stand. The old man motions the boy to stay, puts down his weapons and goes silently into the water and is gone. Everything is still. No breeze stirs leaves. No birds call. The whole world waits. There is just the duck sitting there on the surface. Suddenly, soundlessly, it vanishes. The boy waits, searching the still water. Nothing moves. A waterfowl hoots from nearby reeds. An egret stands stock still in shallow water, beak poised. The world is hushed. After what seems an age the old man rises up out of the water holding out the dead duck and smiling at the astonished boy.

Sitting by the fire, devouring the warm and juicy flesh of the singed duck, the boy replays in his mind the whole ritual of that hunt. He'd hunted and fished with the men on the island, learning as he went many things, but he'd never seen skill like the old man showed. Or felt the kind of power the old man contained within what had seemed to the boy until recently an ancient body.

The old man wipes his mouth with the back of his hand, spits, turns to the boy and, indicating the land around them, says, You will never go hungry in this land as long as you are patient and learnt the things you need to know.

Sitting by that lagoon with his belly full and the world alive with sound and movement, with the Jabiru still there in the distance like an omen, the boy promises himself that he will learn to hunt like the old man and that he will try to understand the ways of the world.

They go on, all the time heading west until they come to a broad stream that blocks their way. From the top of the high eastern bank the boy looks down into the dark waters. It is the first big stream he has seen and its sluggish waters, wide and deep and smelling of mud, are different from the small island streams that flow swift and clear. The tall trees along the banks cast gloomy shadows over the water, making odd shapes that worry the boy. Something evil lurks in those dark depths. The boy shivers.

Come, the old man calls. We must go from this place.

They work their way upstream to where the water runs shallow and swift over smooth round stones between verdant banks of rainforest. Through gaps in the canopy sunlight plays on the running water, highlighting the surface of exposed rocks. They cross the stream and work their way along the crowded western bank. At a rock ledge above a deep still pool they stop. The old man motions the boy to sit quietly and points down into the pool. Deep down, beneath the reflecting patters of the surface, the boy sees a long thin shape slowly traversing the depths, going in a lazy snake-like motion from one end of the pool to the other. The old man tells the boy that it is an eel and that it is good eating, but that Eel is part of his family's totem and cannot be touched by him.

The boy asks about his own totem but the old man shrugs and says, that will be decided in good time and turns away.

I check to see if Mary is still listening. She is! I have an audience! Maybe the only one I'll ever have for this tale.

Go on, she says, I'm interested.

I continue.

Further upstream, on a stretch of gravelly creek bank, they make camp. For several days they stay here, fishing from the stream and hunting across the undulating country to the west. Sometimes the boy sees small groups of black people in the distance. Most of the time they signal to the old man before silently disappearing into the country. At other times men approach with signs of peace and begin long conversations with the old man in language the boy does not understand. It is only men that the boy sees close up. They are hunters or advanced scouts for larger groups. Some are marked in elaborate painted designs across the whole of their bodies. All have the banded welts of warriors across their backs and across their chests. Some, like the old man, have bones through their noses. They are formidable warriors! On no occasion does the old man introduce the boy to any of the men but the more the

boy sees of them the more he begins to understand that his island people are but a small outpost of a great nation whose boundaries are infinite.

The women and children he sees mostly from a distance. Those he does see wear string belts (from which hang various items) and carry string baskets but for the most part their bodies are unadorned. Some are weighed down with bundles of sticks and some – mostly very young - carry small children. Some of the older women wear white headdresses of mourning. There are children too, but they stay close to the women.

They are at a fresh pool of deep water. It's early morning, the sun not yet risen. A thick fog hangs over the water. Whipbirds snap from the thickets along the banks. The old man is by the fire, cooking freshly caught fish. After they have eaten the old man rises from the fire and beckoned the boy to stand before him. The boy stands before the old man, eyes cast down. He senses in the old man a change of mood and fears the worst. But the old man places his hands firmly on the boy's shoulders and the boy looks up and sees that the old man is looked down on him with a steady gaze. The boy wonders if he's failed some test. But the old man places a hand under the boy's chin and lifts up the boy's face and smiles down.

Soon, he says, you will be ready.

And the boy is pleased.

They scatter the ashes of their fire, gather their belongings and set off once again. All day they walk, until they come to open country. From the top of a low rise on a hill clear of trees the boy sees a line of hills far to the southwest. The old man points, says that they are going there. As they go the country becomes rougher and harder to cross. After two days they enter broken country that the old man says was his father's country but that his father died in a fight over women and that this was a bad thing because the country was lost to him. They follow a small creek through a steep gorge into which daylight hardly penetrates. Cold air drifts down from the tops. For the first time in his life the boy feels real cold. They go on, following the narrowing creek as it winds up to high stony country of twisted trees and stunted undergrowth through which hard round boulders penetrate. It is country unlike any

the boy has experienced and although he is young and inexperienced he knows that it is a different spirit country to the lowlands. It is a cold, hard and unforgiving land and he finds himself yearning for the soft certainties of his island home.

They reach a broken plateau intersected by deep ravines strewn across with giant boulders. The path grows ever steeper, winding between walls of rock that press in on them. The old man keeps on, the exhausted boy trailing behind, climbing higher and higher until, just as the boy feels he can go no further, the old man stops. Only after his heart has ceased its palpitations does the boy look up. What he sees frightens him. On a sheer wall of white rock, under an overhanging ledge, are images painted in red and yellow and black. The boy is frightened for there are no such things on the island. His first instinct is to draw back but the images hold him. He feels their power. They are at once immediate yet ghostly distant. The old man says nothing, just stands staring at the pictures as if taking in knowledge. During his long walk across the country with the old man the boy saw people whose body markings and bearings spoke of a great diversity in the nation to which he was part, but the images on this wall spoke of time and space beyond his comprehension. He had begun to comprehend the geographic extent of the land and the diversity of the people on it but now, facing these ancient images, he begins to see that he is also part of something immensely old. This is revelation.

They go from the stone country into a land of mists, where the trees are tall and wound about with vines. As they go the mist clears but the sun hardly penetrates. He looks up to the treetops from where strange sounding birds call but all he sees is a tangled mass of leaves. He grows giddy from looking up. The huge epiphytes that cling to trunks or nestle in branches appear to look down on him with malice. The boy feels something cold on his foot. A small black thing has attached itself. The boy swipes at it but it clings on. The old man laughs and, with a deft flick of his fingers sends the thing spinning off, leaving a patch of red blood. They go along a path that seems to have been worn by feet smaller than theirs and as they go the old man seems to grow more and more uneasy.

This forests, he teases the boy, contains small evil people who love the taste of human flesh.

On all sides the forest closes in. The boy can see no more than a few paces into the darkness. The forest is alive. Strange noises come from places impossible to pin down. Odd birdcalls and the thumping of large unimaginable things come out of the depths. It is possible, in this light, in this dripping forest, to imagine anything, including the old man's story of little people who like human flesh.

They go on, following the narrow pathway that eventually leads out of the forest. They find themselves walking beneath eucalypt trees at the edge of an escarpment. From a large exposed rock, projecting out over the escarpment they stand looking out over the coastal plains. Away in the distance, towards the northeast the boy sees the bay he'd crossed all those months ago. He sees the shimmering white sand hills of Moorgulpin and, across the narrow strait that separates the low northern extremity of Minjerriba, his island home. The pull of the island is strong. He will feel this pull many times before he returns.

They turn east and follow a path down a spur of the main range that eventually eases down to the plains. They continue through low undulating country dotted all about with shallow pools of still water. After the coolness of the high country the boy welcomes the warmth of the lowlands. The humidity wraps him like a light blanket. As they go the boy finds himself staring at the scars that cross old mans back. He has seen the scars many times but until now had taken little notice of them. He wonders now if there is a pattern in those scars, but if there is he can define no meaning to it. He only hopes that one day he too will wear such scars of knowledge.

But there is something else. As they go he sees that the rippling muscles beneath the skin that carries those scars – muscles that could belong to a much younger man – have tensed. Something is wrong. The old man stops and points down at the path. It has widened. On its surface are narrows grooves and the imprints of hooves.

White man's road, the old man says, and spits.

They come to a newly made fence of barbed wire. Its sharp iron tips glint in the sunlight. The old man curses the fence and tears part of it down, bloodying his hand as he does. Shaking polluted blood from his hands the old man walks on. The boy follows meekly behind. Before he'd met the old man the boy had dreamed of the time when he would be taken to the ceremonies. After the first meeting with the old man those dreams became fantasies in which he would return to the island a fully initiated warrior and lead his people to victory over the white men. When the old man had returned to the island and asked for him the boy knew that he must be strong and fulfil that promise. Even the sight of the white man's ship sailing towards them across the bay, and other signs of the white men's power did not dent his optimism. They'd travelled many nights and over great distances. He felt he'd earned the old man's trust and that it would not be long before he would be led into the secret place where he would become that man of his dreams.

But on this wide road with its fence of twisted iron, he is not so sure.

They leave the road and enter a dense stand of trees. Beams of light break through the canopy, spotlighting the surface of a waterhole.

Woolloongabba, the old man says with a sweeping gesture, my mother's people's country.

On the bank of the waterhole a goanna suns itself in a patch of sunlight. The old man goes quietly towards it. The goanna, sensing danger, moves its head. The old man stamps his foot and the goanna shoots across the ground, scales a tree trunk and props, its long tail dangling. It is so still, the goanna, almost indistinguishable from the bark of the tree. But the old man is quick. In one movement he has the goanna's tail and is swinging it free of the tree and bringing its head smack against the trunk.

In quick deft movements the old man prepares a fire and before long they are devouring the gamy meat. The boy's admiration for the old man, already strong, increases. He sees in the old man much to be proud of and hopes that he would one day be like that: tall and strong and quick. He will learn to survive in this bountiful land. He will be strong.

They leave the shade of Woolloongabba and cross open country until they find themselves at the edge of a cliff overlooking a river so broad it is like a sea. The old man points across the river.

Mi-an-jin, he says softly, pointing across the river. The sound is like a snatch of song: mee...an..jin...

I look up from my reading. She's asleep. Probably has been for ages. I make a few hasty corrections to my text, close the manuscript and look around the room. The other women are also asleep. One, an old woman all skin and bones, is snoring lightly, open-mouthed, false teeth out. She looks like death. I look back at Mary Wright, my one time sweetheart and on-again-off-again lover. She looks peaceful. I see in her ageing features remnants of the beauty that had attracted me from such an early age and I'm saddened.

A nurse comes in, gives me a look that says 'time's up pal'. She's small and sturdy, of Asian stock. A sudden realisation hits me: none of the nurses I've seen so far are European but all the patients are. Mary and me; we are a dying breed. I ease my way out of the ward, careful not to wake her. I find my car and drive home through near-empty streets, park in my designated spot under my apartment building, catch the lift to the thirteenth floor and enter my sanctuary. It's good to be home. I pour myself a wine and go out onto the balcony, sit looking out over the city. But I'm seeing nothing, I'm thinking about what I've just read to Mary and wondering about the boy. I'm also wondering about me; or, more specifically, the child that I was.

Black people weren't part of my life. The only black person I knew was Maureen Walker who was in my class at school and who was so quiet you hardly noticed her. I felt sorry for her because she found schoolwork difficult and no one made friends with her. There weren't many blacks kids in that school and none, apart from her, in my class. I did sometimes see black people in the grottier parts of town, but that was in the company of my parents and from the security of a tram or bus. My mother said that they were to be avoided but to me they seemed less intimidating than

the white derros whose smells inhabited the city streets, or the drunken ex-soldiers and labourers who hung out of the doors of the Edinburgh Castle Hotel.

My father the socialist pointed out a derro one day and said, there but for the grace of God my arse!

He often made blunt statements like that; statements that on one level didn't make much sense, but when you thought about them, did.

There were lots of derros in the Brisbane of my childhood. My father often spoke of the Depression, said that some people never recovered from it. I guessed some of the derros I saw were Depression people but I also knew that some were returned servicemen from the recent war. Sometimes I'd wonder if one day I might be a derro wandering the back streets, sleeping under old newspapers in Albert Park or in some alley behind some old church (a thought that would visit me from time to time as the years went by, mostly but not always against my will). But I knew that I would never be like the black man I saw that time with my father at South Brisbane. Or like Maureen Walker.

My father was a model for me, much more so than my mother. He was working class and proud of it while my mother gave people to understand that she was from more genteel stock. She might have had a point because one day she took me on an outing into a different world; one I never forgot. I must have been six or seven.

We went on the train to Cleveland. I remember walking out of the station, squinting through weak watery eyes in the light of that bright winter morning at the dark man who came up to us and introduced himself as Neville. He said welcome to Cleveland and led us to a huge black Chrysler and opened the front door and helped my mother in and then opened the back door for me and I sat in the back seat that was so big my feet didn't touch the floor. My mother and the man called Neville in the front seat seemed far away as I peered out through the windows at the rolling countryside of red soil and bright green crops. After a while we turned off the road and went slowly along a long curving drive beneath dark trees and stopped at the foot of a set of white painted stairs that led up to an iron latticed veranda of a house that

was large and old and the man called Neville said here we are and helped my mother out. Then he said cheerio and drove the big shiny car away. We went up the stairs to the top where two old ladies in floral dresses stood waiting. Good afternoon Dot, they said in unison. I was surprised because I'd never heard my mother called by her first name before and didn't until then known what it was. Will, My mother said, this is Aunt Maggy, and the woman called Aunty Maggie shook my hand and my mother turned to the other lady and said, this is Aunt Aggy, and Aunt Aggie shook my hand saying, come on then, and I followed the two old ladies and my mother through a long corridor with rooms either side to a large kitchen smelling of bread and sweet things and my mother took off her coat and we went out onto a back veranda where dainty tea things were set out on a little table covered in a hand crocheted tablecloth and the veranda was high up and I could see across paddocks of bright red soil and dark green strawberry bushes all the way to the mangroves along the shore and across the blue waters of Moreton Bay to a line of blue hills that Aunty Maggie, or was it Aunty Aggie, said was Stradbroke Island and I was caught up in the magic of it all, not just the undulating land and the glistening bay but the whole wonder of the house and the view and the two old ladies in their floral dresses and the chinaware and a sense of something inexplicably beautiful, with people who were different and I thought of my father who sometimes got angry at fancy things and my mother who wished for things she couldn't have and I looked out over that undulating countryside dotted with farms and houses half hidden in clumps of deep green trees with bits of red roof showing and tractors ploughing and people out picking strawberries and the whole world was alive and the people in the fields seemed part of the land itself and Aunty Maggie, or was it Aggie, was putting scones and a glass of lemonade before me asking if I wanted cream with the strawberries and I said I loved the farm and she smiled and told a story about how the farm was cleared from scrub in the early days by their father who was a great clearer who got stuck into the bush as soon as he arrived and built the place up until it was prosperous and when he died he left it to them and they kept it going, saying that if it wasn't for Neville they would have found it all too hard. And I asked where Neville was and they said he was with the others in

the field picking strawberries and I asked if I could join them and the ladies who weren't really my aunts said I could and I left the two old ladies and my mother and their conversation and their bone china cups clinking in the shade of the veranda and went out into the field and the sun was hot but the breeze off the sea was cool and Neville winked and said, don't eat too many young man, and the others laughed and someone called smoko and we went under-the-house and I sat on a box in the half dark with my little legs dangling listening to the pickers rough talk and a woman called Gina who talked in a funny way like the Greek lady at the fish shop my father sometimes took me to winked at me and pinched my cheek saying you're a good picker but if you keep eating them strawberries like that you'll be sick and the others laughed but the man called Neville didn't laugh but looked at me and rolled his eyes winked and I loved the man called Neville and Gina said sing a song for the boy Neville and he laughed softly and shook his head but others yelled go on Neville and someone handed Neville a guitar and he began to sing and it was the first time I'd heard anyone sing like that and it wasn't like my father singing in the shower but like we were a real audience and I was spellbound and Neville sang a sad-sounding song and stopped and hung his head and sat perfectly still and I was even more awed by him and visions of the black man at South Brisbane come to me but Neville was different because his eyes twinkled brightly and I felt a kind of love that was different to that which I felt for my parents and Neville began to sing a low rhythmic dirge in a language I didn't understand and when the song was finished Neville turned to me and said, that was a song about Bobbiwinta that my father used to sing, and he said that Bobbiwinta was from the Kutchi-mudlo mob who was a good turtle hunter who dived in after a turtle one day and never returned and Neville said some words I didn't understand and then he said that was Bobbiwinta calling for his friends to come after him and Neville looked at me in a strange but friendly way and said watch out young fella for the bay is treacherous and full of ghosts and grandmother was calling from upstairs that it is time to go and Aunt Aggy and Aunt Maggy kissed me on the forehead saying what a lovely young man and we got into the big black car and

Neville drove us away and I remember turning and looking out the back window and watching that old house disappear.

I never did see Neville or those ladies or that old house again. And I never found out exactly who those aunts really were.

I smile to myself at the memory of those old ladies whose names really were Aggie and Maggie, and I think how well they fitted my mother's hankering after a more refined world, and how different they were from some of my father's dubious acquaintances.

Like big-boned Col Peters who had, of all things, an open topped Rolls Royce that was old and a bit battered, which didn't lessen its impact on the people we passed that time I went in it with him and my father, staring out from the back seat all pop-eyed because I'd never been in such a car I felt like royalty going through the streets with the people looking. We drove to Mr Peters' farm, which was in the country. I don't know if Mr Peters was driving really fast, or whether it was just the open car and the wind in my hair but I was excited. We drove through open countryside and then the car slowed and we turned into a dirt track and through an open gate and parked in a cloud of dust under a big old tree and we all got out and my father said good to stretch the legs Col and Mr Peters smiled a funny smile and I followed them into a yard behind a big old house that was like a ruined version of the house Auntie Aggie and Auntie Maggie lived in only there wasn't any view and the land all around the house was barren and like a junk yard with piles of steel pipes and wooden posts and all sorts of rubbish strewn about and Mr Peters said well Al guess we'd better get started and my father said guess so Col and they set to work with posthole diggers and spades. Mr Peters said the old bull won't escape this one Al and my father said stud bull like yours Col is worth its weight in gold, which I thought was a silly thing to say and my father asked where's the bull now Col and Mr Peters said agisted Al and I wondered how you could adjust a bull and Mr Peters said costing me a packet Al. I felt useless and asked if I could go over to the house and Mr Peters said sure Will but be careful of the ghost and my father laughed and I walked through a big old

garden that had an orchard which had become a scrub, the old haunted house standing tall on thick black stumps looking like it had seen better days and I remembered Mr Peters saying to my father on the way over no one's lived in the place for years Al I never go into it gives me the creeps too many dead people and I'd asked if it was haunted and Mr Peters had said could be young fella could be and my father laughed but I loved stories of haunted houses and always wanted to go into one just to see and I walked up the rotting front steps into the house and stood for a while on the veranda with the light coming all dappled through rotting latticework covered in creepers wondering if I should go inside, going along the veranda in the almost dark, tip-toeing past discarded things from another time and trying to avoid giant cobwebs and feeling the house that creaked and moved with every shift of wind and every minor change in temperature like a living thing nearing the end of its days and I was scared but excited as I gathered my courage and pushed open a French window and went in, wandering through dark rooms full of fine old furniture and piles of books nobody had read in years, staring up at a huge painted canvas with a gilt frame hanging crookedly on the tongue and groove wall from out of out of which people from another time peered through murky varnish and there were other paintings of landscapes like those of old England on the walls of my own house that my mother loved only much bigger and I went into the kitchen with an old wood stove set into a recess out of which came the stale smell of fat and a huge rat ran across the room and disappeared and I was shaken but disappointed that it wasn't a ghost and I went out of the dark kitchen to a bedroom where old and ghostly lace curtains moved languidly in the breeze coming in through the open windows, the bedroom smelling of death and I went out on the back landing and down the stairs to under-the-house where narrow beams of dusty light penetrated through black lattice casting strange shapes out of ordinary things, past piled up travel cases with stickers on them from foreign places and an electric train set in perfect order and boxes full of Matchbox cars that I wanted to take but couldn't see how I could and I went out from the dark under-the-house into the back that past rusty sheds full of dusty farm equipment and empty chook runs and scattered bits of machinery and old tractors with wheels missing and a huge

bulldozer with caterpillar treads that would never go again and an old Leyland truck with a huge brass radiator that I loved for its rough honesty and other useless things piled up around the place that would never go again and I heard my father calling and went back to where my father and Mr Peters were working on the bullpen, Mr Peters turning to me and saying no ghosts Will and I shook my head and my father smiled and the sun was going down and Mr Peters said not a bad day's work Al think it's time for a beer the gate can wait and my father said I'll drink to that Col and Mr Peters pulled out a large bottle of beer from a cooler and opened it and then he pulled out a bottle of Tristams Sarsaparilla and poured the beer and the soft drink into dirty looking glasses and handed them round saying cheers mates and we are all clinked our glasses...

Years later I learnt that most of the material that went into that bullpen was got from 'foreign orders', mostly from the shipyards where my father worked, and that Mr Peters wasn't just a friend from the football club but someone with a bit of influence who could help my father in his incipient political career and that my father was doing Mr Peters a favour hoping for a return on that favour. In such small ways, I would learn, corruption takes hold.

But at that time in my life every day was an adventure. I had no idea that I was living in an increasingly corrupt city in a corrupt state, and that my father and his foreign orders and expectations of paybacks played a small role in that corruption, a corruption that would increase in the transition of state control from the Labor Party to the Country Party and, eventually, Bjelke-Petersen's National Party dictatorship. Back then my father was my hero and I was continually amazed by the things he was able to construct from bits and pieces liberated from the shipyards. The most unusual – and ultimately the funniest – was a hydraulic clothes hoist he made from bits and pieces. It was based on a Hills Hoist he'd managed somehow to connect to the water supply. In order to raise the clothes line all my mother had to do was turn on the tap. The problem was it leaked. It didn't work! He also made a set of gates: one for the path to the front steps and one for the driveway. These were primed with red oxide but never painted so, throughout the years they stayed that way. Interestingly the red

oxide went well with the bricks of the low front fence my father got from some other no doubt dubious source.

By fifth grade I began to take more interest in the world around me, partly because my father was involved in the Australian Labor Party and would often commented on current affairs at the dinner table. Most people called it the ALP but my father referred to it as The Party. My father didn't believe in God, even though he was raised Roman Catholic and, according to my mother, was once an altar boy. Socialism, he'd say, was the only way. The USSR was the future. He spoke often of his idol Paul Robeson, who also had a rosy view of the USSR. It was hard not to be inspired by his ideals because he held them so fervently. Through him I thought everyone voted for the Labor Party and that one day the world would be a Socialist paradise. I thought everyone thought that way until, a few days before a state election my mother announced that she was going to vote Liberal. That was too much for my father, who cursed her stupidity.

It's not enough is it, he roared, that the bloody Catholics have hijacked The Party with their right wing ideas... No, you have to do your little bit of spoiling too. Voting for the so-called Liberals. What a joke! Conservatives they are. Reactionaries! I'm hoping to be preselected as the Labor candidate for this area next time. What am I going to say to the branch? That my wife votes Liberal!

I don't care, my mother shrilled back. They don't have to know how I vote.

He yelled back something about a thing called The Movement and a man called Santamaria and how they were destroying the Labor Party. And then he said something that made my mother walk stiffly out of the room.

I rather the communists than those bastards, is what he said.

I had no idea what being preselected meant or what The Movement was or what communism was but I was impressed by his passion. These arguments between my parents went beyond party politics; they were really about class. The fact was: my parents came from different class backgrounds. There wasn't supposed to be any real class structure in Australia, certainly not in working-class Brisbane! But my mother

made the most of her family's better education and British background while my father traded on his Irish-Catholic underdoggedness.

In all this I was a bystander, emerging from childhood security into the dangerous world of grown-ups. At home my parents rows became more and more bitter. I thought they'd divorce but they didn't, they just went their separate ways under one roof. My father had his work and his politics and had little time for a son he thought was grown up enough to look after himself. Meanwhile my mother's suffocating concerns over my welfare began to grate on me.

She continued her role as wife and mother, each morning packing lunches for my father and me and waving us off from the front veranda - he off to his work at the shipyards, me off to school - leaving the rest of her day free. She joined a bridge club and a reading circle and, I found out later, did water colours. I remember her sitting at a little desk on the side veranda typing away at a manuscript that she hoped would be published. It never was. That, I think, was her greatest disappointment.

My father went to the shipyards every weekday and sometimes on weekends when there was overtime. I'd watch him carry his Gladstone bag down the front path and away to that mystery he called work. There was something sad about that, especially on fine sunny mornings when work was the last think he wanted. His work was hard and sometimes he got injured. Once he got badly burnt when a boiler he was working on exploded and he spent weeks in hospital.

But it wasn't all bad. One night he called me into the dining room and said, take a look at this. There was excitement in his voice. He didn't share much with me but this time he clearly wanted to. I stood there as he opened his Gladstone bag, took out a roll of paper, cleared the dining room table and rolled out a set of complicated blueprint drawings. It took me some time to work out what they were. They were drawing for large and intricate pipes that he would have to cut and weld. I thought they were incredibly beautiful. What was even better was him asking for my opinion. He needed to make some adjustments and wanted to know if I had any thoughts. I had no idea! But it was a gesture I appreciated. I guessed he'd confused my drawing ability with draftsmanship. There was no correlation between the freehand drawings I

did incessantly and the kind of technical drawings he was dealing with on those blueprints. But I did see that there was beauty in that heavy dirty industry he worked in.

The tension between my parents continued. My mother had her church and proud British heritage. My father had his working class prejudices and his socialism. She had dreams that would never be fulfilled. I learnt later that my father had forsaken his religion for her and had married into the Church of England, which he later rejected. He rejected all religion but it was her religion he hated most. He couldn't abide the C of Es, who he saw as supporters of Menzies and the 'so-called Liberals'. He was, he said often, proudly socialist and to hell with Capitalism and religion. This led to arguments that sometimes broke out in shouting fits that ended in long silences. Sometimes I wished they would separate.

I began to explore the city. In those days it seemed a dark place. In part it was the trains: all those little blue tank engines hauling long trains of wooden carriages through Central and Roma Street and Brunswick Street and out to the suburban stations like Woolloowin, Eagle Junction, Toombul, Nunda, Geebung... sending black smoke and soot flying, covering buildings of stone and houses of wood with fine black patinas difficult to dislodge. There were those heavy green BB 17 1/4s engines and the lighter blue tank engines that trundled heavily through the underground tunnels and cuttings, puffing like living beasts (how do I remember something as obscure as BB 17 1/4? - one of those useless bits of memory that lodges in your brain and won't go away). It wasn't just the trains that made the city seem dark; at The Valley corner tramlines and trolleybus wires almost blocked out the sky. The natural world added to the effect, especially in summer when dark clouds gathered and the rain went on for weeks unending, flooding the park and under-the-house and setting the frogs croaking. Winter was brighter; days then when the morning fog that blocked out our view of the park would lift to dry sunny weather and your lips would crack in the cold west wind but everything would be clear and bright and it didn't matter about the sooty facades of buildings.

I was happy enough most of the time. At Woolloowin State School there were twelve hundred kids and always someone to play with. There was a fife and drum band that we marched to, going formally from the bitumen quadrangle to class like we were part of some kind of military operation, as if we were being trained for some future war. Which maybe we were. Before the fifes and drums Mr Matthews the headmaster would stand at the front and address us in stern tones about some incident or other (mostly important matters like wearing proper uniforms and not going about with our socks around our ankles). Which was bit of a joke for the kids in that school who never wore shoes. There were the tough kids who would never pull their socks up, not even if it meant the cane. Sometimes some poor kid would be hauled before the gathered multitude for a dressing down or we'd be told about some misdemeanour, like the kid who was caught playing with a condom, and how such behaviour was unacceptable to a school that needed to maintain its reputation.

I never excelled at sport. I couldn't run fast and couldn't jump far so never made the cricket or rugby teams. I ended up playing hockey, which the rugby kids thought a sissy's game. I didn't care. I never took it seriously anyway. I was the kid who liked art and drawing, which in that school meant I was different. My friends were different too: Billy Drahaam was big and fat and slow and his father was taken away during the war because he was German; Gary Lee, whose first name was really Chong, lived in the Chines Garden his father ran on the far side of Kedron Brook; Colin Clark was a bit girlish and a bit of a pest but hung around anyway.

I'd inherited a certain toughness from my father and was considered good enough to be invited into Gardener's Gang (I was small but had stood up to a bigger kid who called me names I didn't like and when challenged to a fight had backed down). Roger Gardener was big and seemed older than the rest of us. Our gang was the toughest in the school. Billy and Gary weren't included but Colin Clark sometimes tried to worm his way in. One day in class the headmaster came in and, with our teacher Mr Ford standing beside him, asked the Gardener Gang to come to the front. Apparently we'd done something bad. Mr Ford called out the names of the

gang one by one. I sat there hoping desperately that my name wouldn't be called. But it was and I sauntered to the front of the class to join the line up.

Mt Ford turned to the headmaster and said, I think that's it Mr Matthews. That's the lot.

Mr Matthews was about to launch into a recitation of our crimes when Colin Clark rose from his seat.

Mr Matthews stopped mid sentence, looked over his spectacles at Colin Clark and said, Yes boy?

Sir, you missed me, Colin Clark mumbled.

Everyone laughed because it made him seem stupid.

Come on out then, Mr Matthews said.

I was embarrassed because Colin Clark sometimes played with me.

And what was our crime? The previous Sunday a bunch of kids from our school met a gang of kids from the Catholic school on some vacant land beside Kedron Brook. I don't know how it all came about but there must have been about fifty kids facing each other across a kind of no-mans land. Brisbane was like that then: all these great open spaces that might once have been farms, or simply land cleared for some housing project that never happened. All I remember was a great open space between the two gangs and feeling a mixture of dread and excitement. We closed in on each other and someone threw a rock. That's all I remember with any clarity. It got a bit nasty after that. Someone was hit and there was blood. That put a stop to things and the mob broke up. But someone must have reported it and Gardener's gang got blamed for planning the thing. Which wasn't true. Anyway, after standing in front of the class for a bit we were all marched off to Mr Matthew's office for six cuts, which were administered half-heartedly.

Years later, after I'd read about the great fights of the Aboriginal people at York's Hollow it occurred to me that that great confrontation by Kedron Brook wasn't all that different, except that no one was killed in our fight.

My life was changing. Puberty hit. A bit late compared to some I guess, but it hit nevertheless. Family life was changing too. My father's political interests had

become serious. He finally got his preselection and was running for a seat in the state parliament. This meant that he was often out canvassing (a word I hadn't until then heard). He'd go off with wads of election material, mostly on weekends or after work, walking the streets and introducing himself to the voters. I went with him a couple of times but didn't like the way he had to be so polite, even to people who clearly had no time for his side of politics. It didn't help that my mother said he'd never get voted in because we lived in a Liberal seat Liberal, my father always said, was a misnomer – I learnt lots of useful words from him – and that it should be called the conservative party). My mother said the ALP was just using my father. He said it didn't matter, that if he did well and increased the Labor vote he'd be given a better seat to contest next time. I saw then that my father had long-term plans. Someone said that he was doing it to get out of the shipyards but I knew there was more to it than that.

Sometimes men from The Party would come around and talk political tactics round the dining room table. My mother would flounce past emitting frosty signals the others couldn't help but receive. She'd head for the bedroom where she'd lie fuming, her unread book open beside her. The men would go on regardless, talking into the night. Sometimes I'd sit with them, taking in bits of conversation that I tried hard to follow.

Like my father saying out of the blue one evening, Duhig's got a lot to answer for; he and the Catholic Church...

Ivor Mansfield, the woolly-haired branch secretary who wore the thickest reading glasses I had ever seen, squinted around the table as if not sure who had spoken. He focussed on my father and said, why take it out on Duhig? He isn't exactly supporting The Movement. Colin Clark is the problem. He's the one influencing Santamaria...

By this time I had a vague idea of what The Movement was but the reference to Colin Clark threw me. Colin Clark was in my class at school and for a while used to hang around Gardener's gang like a bad smell. How could he influence someone called Bob Santamaria who lived in Melbourne.

Colin Clark is in my class, I said.

They all laughed.

The Colin Clark we are talking about never went to Woolloowin State School, that's for sure!

That was my father, putting meaning into the word Woolloowin that I thought might be sarcasm. I realised then that the Colin Clark they were talking about was some big wig in politics. That's the way it was. Sometimes I'd get caught out and feel stupid.

They were just a bunch of men sitting round a table, going on as if they might have some control over events. Maybe they did, maybe they didn't, but there was a certain excitement round that table, with the men naming names of people I guessed must be important. Names like Evatt, Menzies and Eddie Ward were bandied around the table as if they were intimate acquaintances.

One night there was a heated debate centred round a man called Vince Gair.

If he has his way, Ivor Mansfield said, he will cause a split and the ALP will be stuffed.

One of the men said it was the fault of the communists, to which my father took exception, saying that at least the communists stood up for the workingman. This elicited a heated debate about the pros and cons of communism. I couldn't help but be interested. They made politics sound interesting. They used words like bona-fide, which I didn't understand but which seemed important. That I understood little of what they were talking about, that I hadn't heard of many of the people they mentioned, made it all the more interesting.

My father lost the election to a Liberal (a word I came to despise because it was what my father called a misnomer) and went back to his work at the shipyards a disappointed man. He still went to branch meetings but the dining room table meetings stopped. Not that I cared. I needed my own space and sometimes got annoyed when my parents set aside their own struggles to take an interest in me. Sometimes they'd embarrass me by intercepting clandestine activities (like drawing buxom women from the pages of MAN magazine). I was pretty naïve and my

pubescent (illicit) behaviour did not always go unnoticed. One night I was enjoying a rare hot bath when my father poked his head round the bathroom door and nearly caught me in the act.

Don't have baths Will, he said meaningfully, they're dirty. Take a shower in future.

Or the time my grandmother came round one warm day when I was in shorts and said, You're getting hairy legs Will. Beware of temptations! Self indulgence is wicked.

It took me a while to work out what the hell she was on about. Stupid adults. It was like the saying you'll go blind if you do that!

I was thirteen. The world was becoming increasingly complex. I had urges I couldn't resist and sometimes I felt guilty. The tension in the house increased. I had to escape. Afternoons after school I'd ride my bike through the hilly streets of Ascot and Hamilton. I'd sometimes get momentarily lost in those winding tree-lined streets and sometimes I'd imagine that I was in some other city and maybe never find my way home. I discovered the lookout on Bartley's Hill from where you could see clear across the city to the western mountains. Cunningham's Gap was out there. We learnt about that at school; how a man called Alan Cunningham found a way through the mountains to the great plains of the Darling Downs. I dreamt of going out there, up the range and onto the Darling Downs; another country: distant, higher, cooler from where all those big beefy men in tweed coats I'd see at the Ekka came from. To the south, beyond the pale blue outline Border Ranges, was New South Wales. There was a world beyond Brisbane and one day I'd seek it out.

From Bartley's Hill I'd freewheel down Toorak Road to the river, hoping the brakes would hold. There was nothing like the river late in the afternoon with the setting sun turning the water golden and the lights on and ships lined up along Brett's Wharf even though it wasn't yet dark and the last of the little sailing boats criss-crossing Hamilton Reach and the ferries crossing back and forth and giant coal and cement barges gliding silently by. You could forget home there, dream of getting

away, of joining the merchant navy. But then I'd get hungry and go home to find my mother sitting in the kitchen asking where I'd been or complaining about my father who was out canvassing votes for the next election.

He never gives up, she said one night as she cut some corned beef for dinner. I asked her what she meant and she said that he was having another go.

At what, I wanted to know.

At politics, of course! Don't expect him to stay around here and fix things that need fixing do you?

With him out canvassing and her moping or trying to get me to do things I didn't want to do the need to escape became even greater. Weekends I'd go on long bike rides, mostly alone. The Serpentine was the best place, that no-man's land of tidal backwaters and mangrove thickets beyond the airport where the borders between land and sea seemed not to exist and there seemed to be no beginning or end to anything. You could get lost there. Be alone with just the silence. I'd leave my old bike and walk along tidal creek banks among mangrove roots where the only sounds were the soft scurry of mud crabs and the distant screech of sea birds. All along the muddy banks, between half-sunken hulks of once proud yachts and the skeletons of fishing boats long abandoned, there'd be Whimbrels and Curlews and Egrets and Spoonbills and a host of smaller birds that were impossible to identify. Out on the tidewater shags plashed and overhead there'd be Sea eagles and Brahminy Kites and Ospreys and gulls and terns. Whistlers called from within the thickets, Butcherbirds sang from high up in lone trees out on the flats. Kingfishers and Rainbow birds darted about. I wasn't any kind of ornithologist and couldn't name all those birds back then but I was aware of them.

Within those thickets I'd wander, lost in my own dream world, with no one around except maybe a lone mud crabber or fisherman. Once, from the middle of a rickety wooden bridge I dropped a stone and watched it sink slowly into the mud, like I would too if I fell. In the most unlikely places, at the end of dirt roads going nowhere, I'd come across old shacks you'd think no one could possibly live in except

that there'd be clothes hanging from a line. Once I saw an old grey tramcar in a clearing hacked out of the mangroves, rusting and woebegone, with no wheels and broken windows. From out of one of those windows a face appeared. That was scary. In the middle of a higher piece of ground covered in buffalo grass I saw a milking shed fallen into disrepair, its wooden planks seeping like organic matter into the soggy paddock where, surprisingly, cows grazed.

Some times I'd end up at Cribb Island. That was another world. From the glistening shell-grit beach with its backdrop of mangroves you could see right across the bay to the white sand hills of Moreton Island. Along the shore were fishermen's shacks, the yards full of upside down fishing boats, strung-out nets, oars, outboard motors, oil drums, rusting anchors, crab nets and assorted other detritus. Out in the mud flats low tide exposed half sunken boats, rubber boots, abandoned crabbing cages. People wandered over the mud with buckets and spades collecting bait. Cribb Island was a messy unkempt village of outsiders that bore absolutely no resemblance to the pictures of pretty English villages my mother had framed and placed on our lounge room wall. When my mother once said there were no slum areas in Brisbane I thought of Cribb Island and wondered if she'd ever been there.

One Sunday Billy Drahaam came with me. He wasn't a good bike rider. Too fat and clumsy. He came under protest, as he so often did on our excursions. At Cribb Island we left our bikes against a tree by the shore and walked along the shellgrit beach. It was good to have someone to share the place with and I felt just a little proprietorial. I was even a little proud of Cribb Island, which I saw it as my special secret place, a place hardly anyone knew (those who did usually had harsh words to say about it). It might have been a poor man's retreat, as my father once described it, but to me it was magic with its shellgrit beach and its view to the white tip of Moreton Island way out there across the glistening bay. I was pleased that, on the day Billy Drahaam came with me, the tide was in and he couldn't see the mud flats and all the rubbish low tide exposed. I tried to tell him that despite the messy shacks with their accumulations of fishing gear and rubbish it was probably a good place to live.

But he wasn't having that. He said it was a dump and that there was nothing to do there.

On the way home that day we rode across Jackson's Creek into Jackson's Estate. Jackson's Estate made Cribb Island look civilised. It was a tumbledown place, a forgotten camp of the dispossessed, all weedy dirt lanes and corrugated iron shacks and army surplus igloos behind falling down fences. Igloos were what we called the US Army Nissan huts left behind after the war. Some were taken to properties and used for sheds but some ended up at Jackson's Estate as housing. I'd seen images of the shacks of the poor areas of the American South. Jackson's Estate reminded me of them.

Billy Drahaam cursed me for taking him off the track to what he called a god-forsaken place. Then he began to sulk. That was funny, seeing big Billy Drahaam like that, peddling behind me like a big useless lump. We passed two little kids playing round a running water tap. They were mostly naked. One wore a dirty white singlet, another a torn shirt. Neither had pants. Not that they cared. They seemed happy enough.

We rode past a sad looking downtrodden couple sitting on a lump of wood that passed for a doorstep leading up to the open door of a rusty igloo. The man wore a once-white tattered singlet that exposed an enormous belly. The woman, who was skinny, wore a shapeless cotton dress and no shoes. They were arguing and the woman was crying and yelling at the same time. Billy Drahaam said the place gave him the creeps.

Despite the apparent hopelessness and the desperate poverty, beyond the outer coverings of tin and plywood and the mess of treeless yards, I had, even then as a child, a sense that there was a community there that was more closely-knit than any I was part of. Everyone there must have know everyone else and, maybe, supported each other in their poverty. In my street I knew hardly anyone.

Two boys our age came down the track with fishing rods and a bucket full of freshly caught fish. They invited us to join them in a feast, said they were going to bar

b que them but Billy Drahaam said we had to get home otherwise he'd be in trouble. We rode away, Billy Drahaam saying that he was glad to be out of that place.

It's not so bad Bill, I said, it's just different. There's the bay to boat on, and all the fishing and crabbing you could want. Those kids seemed OK.

It'll all be gone one day, he said.

I didn't take much notice of that comment at the time but he was right. Years later Cribb Island and Jackson's Estate would be reclaimed for airport extensions, leaving only fading memories. There were some protests. We are poor people, the residents said, where else are we going to find accommodation? But few outside Jackson's Estate and Cribb Island cared.

My mother didn't. She said Good riddance.

Cribb Island and Jackson's Estate were peripheral parts of the old messy Brisbane. They belonged to a slower time, a time when drop-centre trams screeched round sharp corners and private school kids wore boater hats and the football club met in a small tin shed in the middle of Melrose Park and the honeymoon came in his old Morris Cowley and the fruit man in his Dodge ute and the baker followed his horse-drawn cart down the street and the milkman left the milk can under-the-house near the gas meter which you had to put a shilling in when the gas was low and people had chooks and vegetable gardens and back yards were big enough to kick a footy in and little blue tank engines hauled long trains of wooden carriages belted out black smoke and buses had human names like Leyland and Guy and City Council men wearing blue singlets came with little terrier dogs looking for rats, when there were abandoned air-raid shelters and bunkers among the weeds in the vast paddocks beyond the airport and second-hand Lend Lease Fargo trucks served civilian duties and army tanks and armoured cars rusted away in the dirty yards of Boondall and the silver fuselages of Dakotas were scattered about the city in empty lots.

There is nothing left of Cribb Island or Jackson's Estate. The fishermen and housewives and crabbers who inhabited those serpentine backwaters have long gone. I imagine the ghosts of those people hovering above their old haunts, looking down

sadly one last time on what had been before being sucked into the intakes of jumbo jets flying out of the international airport that claimed their community.

Another one of the old weird places - one that survived - was Nudgee Beach. It was a bit like Cribb Island: a scattering of wooden shacks along a mangrove shore, mud flats at low tide and views across the bay to Moreton Island. Just off the dirt road leading to Nudgee Beach was a place called Nudgee Waterhole. There were horror stories about that place and we were warned not to go there. People drowned there, they said. Despite the warnings I did go in once on my way home from Nudgee Beach. The day had become dark and overcast, which added to the excitement. I put my bike down beside the road and crept in. Within those dark and swampy thickets and tangled clump of swamp oaks and paperbarks I found the waterhole. It was both pretty and scary. There were flowering waterlilies along the edges and dark water in the middle that looked deep. I could imagine how people had drowned there, just as I'd been told. What made the experience even more terrifying was a feeling that the water was calling me in. I had to resist the urge to enter into it.

Despite my fears I pressed on into the thickets, following what looked like an old path. The path became difficult to follow and I was about to turn back when I spotted a circle of earth about thirty paces in diameter. The flat space within the circling earthen wall was covered with weeds but there were no trees or tall bushes within the ring, so that the whole was clearly visible. I didn't know what it was but felt that it was very old. I couldn't imagine any purpose for it. As I stood there gazing out over the ring I felt that I was being watched. I looked around but there was no one. Then I remembered someone at school talking about Nudgee Waterhole and claiming there were ghosts there and that the last person to drown there had been talked into the water. That, and the feeling of being watched scared me. Suddenly I was running for my bike and peddled like mad away from that place.

A car horn blasts up from the street below. I snap out of my reverie (a condition I increasingly find myself in these days of introspection) to find my wine glass still half full. I down it in one go and go inside. It's time for bed.

3

Yesterday we had one of those late summer storms. It came after days of heat and humidity and cleared the air. Today is fine and warm and far less humid. My balcony is open, letting in wafts of air that, every now and then, feel almost cool; presaging, I hope, the changing of seasons (such as they are in this sub-tropic town). I'm at my computer, transcribing the corrections and additions to my manuscript I'd made during my visit to Mary. Since my renewed contact with her and her apparent desire to hear my story 'before it's too late' (her words, not mine) I feel an urgency to finish the thing.

I'm typing away when the phone rings. It's her!

I'm back home, she says breathlessly. Things are on the mend.

I tell her I'm pleased (and I am), although not about her being at home, which means she's with that George bloke, cosy on their expensive acreage out Pullenvale way. I've never been there but I can picture the place in my head: sixties ranch-style house, white painted wooden rails surrounding horse paddocks, a dog or two, guests chatting round the pool...

I was wondering, she says, interrupting my slowly evolving portrait of country life, if we could catch up. Maybe go for a drive.

It's an odd request, especially from her. She used to hate 'going for drives'.

Any place in particular, I ask.

Remember when you used to take me for drives in that car of yours. Austin wasn't it. God, that was ages ago.

We were eighteen!

Why don't we go for one now, she says.

You always hated drives, I say. Especially with me!

That was then, Will.

Where to, I ask after a pause.

Cleveland, she says. You took me there once. Remember? We went right out to the point. It was nice.

I tell her my car is being serviced, which is a lie.

Be my guest, she says. I have to come into town anyway. I could pick you up after I've finished my business.

I'm not sure what to say. On those long past drives she spoke of she'd start off all enthusiastic then quickly get bored.

Come on Will. The seaside. Sea breeze. You can read to me from your book there.

She picks me up mid morning and we drive over the Story Bridge and out along Old Cleveland Road and up the long climb to Camp Hill, steel tramlines from a past glinting in the middle of the road. I point them out to her.

Part of the urban palimpsest, I say.

The what?

Palimpsest: a layering.

Whatever, she says, and goes quiet.

Remember that time we came here in the tram, I say.

She thinks for a moment.

Oh, yes, she exclaims. One of your silly excursions.

It's summer school holidays and I'm with Billy Drahaam at the Kalinga tram terminus, sitting under the shop awning eating ice creams, the day clear and bright and quiet and everything is still and I'm caught up in the prevailing lassitude, bored, not knowing what to do and Mary Wright who I've got a crush on comes down the street with Gloria Green who my mother says is a tart and I believe my mother because one day Gloria Green brought some porno stories to school and showed them to me and I was shocked but she laughed and said I was a prude and I thought it sad that Mary Wright hung out with her and Gloria Green says what are you kids doing and laughs because she thinks she's not a kid but a sophisticated twelve year old and I feel small. Billy Drahaam's soft flabby face blushes red but I'm not going to let Gloria Green laugh at me so say waiting for you and she says smart arse and Mary

Wright laughs and Billy stands up and he's so tall there beside Gloria Green and I realise that she isn't tall just plump and I looked at Mary Wright who, beside Gloria Green, looked slim and pretty and I see that she's taller than Gloria Green and Mary Wright is looking at me in a strange way like she's sussing me out, maybe even seeing me in a new light and I feel something between us and am sure she feels it too and a tram arrives and we all turn and watch as it trundles slowly down Shaw Road and comes to a stop just before the buffers at the end of the line where the road slopes to the bridge over Kedron Brook and the tram is sitting there silent and still, one of the newer silver things that to me always looked like giant reptiles with their pointed noses and single drivers windows and single headlight in the middle above an upturned chin and two people get off and the driver gets out and pulls down the rear trolley pole and hooks it in place then goes round to what was the front of the tram which is now the rear and with a hooked rod unhooks the trolley pole and guides it into place on the overhead wire and the conductor scrolls through the destination names on the side indicator, rolling through names like Salisbury, Bardon, New Farm, Belmont, before stopping at Rainworth which is other end of the Kalinga line and the driver and the conductor sit chatting over fags by an open door of the tram and they flick their fag-ends onto the road and the driver gets up from his seat and looks at his watch and says to the conductor loud enough for us to hear, ready to roll mate, and the fat conductor eases himself reluctantly out of his seat and strolls to the rear of the tram and leans out the door and seeing no one reached for the bell and I am yelling lets go and jumping up and running for the tram and Billy Drahaam comes waddling after me and Mary Wright and Gloria Green are following and we are sitting in the tram facing each other, Mary and Gloria on one seat, me and Bill on the other and Gloria Green is asking why are we on this tram and I'm saying something to do and the conductor is ringing the bell *ding, ding* and the tram is moving and Billy Drahaam is saying where we were going Will and I'm saying Belmont just like that, the name just coming to me and Mary Wright is asking why Belmont and I'm saying because it's on the south side at the end of the line and I've never been there and I like the sound of the name and she's shrugging and we are all staring out the window,

the tram rolling out of Kalinga and Gloria Green looks dumb like she's has been tricked into something she doesn't want to be part of and I'm feeling good about that and I'm sneaking a glance at Mary Wright who is beautiful but Gloria Green has big knees we are stopping at the Kedron Park pub, a couple of drunks getting on and we are going up Lutwyche Road past our school when Billy Drahaam is grabbing my shirt and shouting there's old Matthews and we are all looking out the window seeing Mr Matthews our headmaster pottering about in the front garden and he's dressed in shabby clothes which is odd because we've never seen him in anything other than a wellpressed shirt and tie and the almost empty tram is clanging on through Lutwyche shopping where Charlie Catalano's parents live in an apartment above their fruit shop and Charley is the only person I know who doesn't live in a proper house and who wasn't born in Australia because even Gary Lee whose real first name is Chong was born in Brisbane and lives in a normal house in a normal street, not in an apartment above a shop on a busy main road and we are on Bowen Bridge Road going past the Royal Brisbane Hospital where I was born and past the empty Ekka grounds and the Queensland Museum and over the hill and down into The Valley turning the corner where the tramlines and trolleybus wires block out the sun and tired-looking old people sit disconsolately in rows on wooden seats lined up along the benches out in front of Brunswick Street Station looking like they are waiting for death and I'm saying there but for the grace of God which is a saying my father often used and Gloria Green is snorting and Billy Drahaam is chuckling and Mary Wright is saying you're weird Will and we're passing McWhirters Emporium where my mother shops because it is cheaper than the stores in the city and we are going past the shops and brothels and nightclubs along Wickham Street and the ruins of the Holy Name Cathedral and turning at Petrie Bight, the great grey steel girders of the Story Bridge rising into the sky and we are going up Adelaide Street through the dark cutting below St Johns Anglican Cathedral and Billy Drahaam is saying with sudden realisation this tram doesn't go to Belmont it's a Rainworth tram and I'm saying I know it is but we'll get out at North Quay and catch the Belmont tram there and the tram stops at City Hall and Gloria Green is saying this is stupid I'm not going to any

silly Belmont I'm going to the shops and she's saying you coming Mary and Mary Wright is looking at me and I'm seeing her indecision and maybe even a desire to stay with me then she turns and says you go Gloria I'll go with Will and I'm elated and Bill's deflated and Gloria Green goes off in a sulk and Billy Drahaam and Mary and me walk to the top of Queens Street where a Belmont tram is waiting and I'm saying see told you and Billy Drahaam is shrugging his shoulders and Mary is looking unsure wondering, no doubt if she's made the right decision and the tram is one of the old drop-centre great heavy clanging things with a low middle section open to the weather and we're rattling across the grey steel arches of the old Victoria Bridge and I'm leaning out and peering down through bridge girders to the brown river way below and Billy Drahaam is saying I'll fall off if I'm not careful but I'm mesmerised peering through the tracework of silver painted steel to tideswirling water far below giddy with the tram gathering speed and the girders flashing past and the river down there and the conductor telling me to pull my head in and Billy Drahaam saying told you the tram turning into Stanley Street going past the South Brisbane Railway Station where I went once with my parents to meet my uncle who'd come home from the war on the train from Sydney the tram going on through Woolloongabba past the cricket ground and up the long winding climb to Camp Hill tramlines curving between bright flowerbeds of roses and the city back there far away and the tram is stopping letting on a man and a woman who sit a few seats in front of us talking excitedly in a kind of gibberish Billy Drahaam is nudging me whispering mongols Mary saying you shouldn't call them that Bill and they are like children only they aren't children the woman fat with a smooth round face and the man small and old looking reminding me of old Jimmy who lived up the street from us and who sometimes came into the kitchen to chat with my mother while she cooked mother was always patient with Jimmy and his funny stories except they weren't really funny because I could never quite figure what he was trying to say but my mother encouraging him laughing along saying that's right Jimmy and when she'd given him enough of her time she'd gently suggest that he should go home and he'd murmur h h h goobay m... m... m... missus Travvermmm and we are at the Belmont terminus

getting off and going into the shop ordering Tristams sarsaparilla and a meat pies and sitting outside eating our lunch the tram is there in the middle of the road all silent and still and hollow and empty like the carapace of a cicada, as if the living part of it had wandered off leaving an empty shell.

And I'm reminded of a recurring dream I used to have, one that started years after the trams had gone from the city. In the dream there'd be a tram sitting quietly in the middle of the road, a hollow thing like the left-over carapaces of cicadas, but as the dream went on it would change into an evil things, its windows and doors become black holes into which I would be drawn and from which I'd struggle to escape. In other dreams the trams would be back, trundling along the old roads of memory. Those dreams were so strong I'd wake wondering if the Council really had decided to re-introduce them.

We drive on past the old terminus; the last tram stop at what used to be the city's outer limit, before the city had sprawled way beyond the scope of a transport system as civilising as a tramway.

You're quiet Will.

Sorry, I say as we drive on towards the Belmont rifle range and into the lowlands, just remembering things.

We cross Bulimba Creek and continue on under the thundering Gateway Arterial. Beyond the last suburbs the country is flat and low, a kind of no-man's land of swampy paperbark thickets barely above sea level, here and there, in shallow lagoons, waterlilies bloom. Despite the flowering waterlilies it's kind of creepy this land, all low and humid and unsuitable for anything much. At the edge of a large body of shallow water, beneath a shady tree, I catch a fleeting glimpse of a Jabiru.

Jabiru, I shout, pointing.

What? Where?

She turns her head but it's too late.

First one I've seen for a long time, I add. They come down from the north. Our version of a stork...

But she's not listening.

We cross Tingalpa Creek, pass through the urban sprawl that used to be the township of Capalaba and enter the outer limits of Cleveland.

Don't remember any of this, she says as we drive through new housing estates and shopping malls, ugly isn't it.

Cleveland is indeed a shock. The bayside fishing village of my childhood had sprawled, become a mini-city complete with commuter railway terminus, multistorey apartments and canal estates with million dollar boats moored in million dollar marinas flanked by million dollar units.

New money, I say.

New credit, she sneers.

Just past the new town centre I ask her to stop.

She jams the brakes.

Why are we stopping, she asks.

I point across the road to the Banyan tree, tell her I'd like to see it up close. I get out of the car and she reluctantly follows me across the road. Many years had passed since I last saw the tree, and then it had only been in passing. Up close it's enormous! Even Mary is impressed. The oldest banyan in the country, a sign says on the footpath says. I point out the areal roots, tell her that as long as it keeps putting down those roots it'll never die.

We all die, she says, turning back towards the car.

We drive through old Cleveland, past shady Moreton Bay Figs and the pub with its ornate veranda and hanging plants, past the nineteenth century courthouse that's now a restaurant, past small cottages nestling among exotic plants. We continue out along the narrow spit that divides the shallow waters of Raby Bay from the open waters of Moreton Bay. At the end of the spit we park under a huge fig, find a shady seat and sit looking out over the water.

Wonderful, she says.

It's a weekday and there's no one around, just us and the sea breeze and figbirds in the trees and the old silent lighthouse which, despite its fresh coat of paint, looks oddly grim. Tidewater laps the seawall, a soothing sound. From our seat we can

see the whole vista of the bay. To the south it narrows to countless channels and islands (an island for every day of the year I was once told, even if many are little more than shifting sand drifts). To the north the bay opens out wide and clear. Beyond the mangroves reaching out to the bay the giant container cranes of the port rise into the sky, reminders of the busy city we've just left.

Stradbroke, she says, pointing to the blurry blue outline of the island.

It seems a long way away.

I tell her that the main character in my story came from there.

I thought your story was fiction.

I tell her it is, but that there's a bit of factual stuff within it.

She murmurs something soft, goes quiet. We sit for a long time, saying nothing.

Will...

I turn to her.

Oh, nothing she says. I was just...

Just what Mary?

Oh, nothing. Nothing really.

Oh, really!

What the hell was she about to tell me? I'm intrigued but don't push it.

Tell me more of your story Will, she says, changing the subject.

The tide is coming in and the sea breeze has stiffening. The pages of my manuscript flutter. It seems too good a moment to read and, for just a moment, I wonder if it's all worthwhile, wonder why I should be taking the trouble to read from a long-winded and convoluted tale about unimportant people in an unimportant part of the world when I could just sit here taking in the breeze. I shrug off my doubts, find my page and begin.

The boy looks down upon the white man's town as if upon a dream...

What town, she asks.

You fell asleep last time Mary.

I re-read the bit about the boy coming to the Kangaroo Point cliffs and looking out over the convict settlement called Brisbane, wondering again, as I tell the story, about the impact such a sight would have had on such a boy. I tell Mary the meaning of Mianjin, which I pronounce 'me an yin'. She says she didn't know that. I tell her not many people do.

I ask her if she wants me to keep going. She says she does.

From his vantage point above the broad river the boy sees an assortment of buildings scattered over cleared ground. He sees dust billowing up behind a machine that slowly traverses the ground, leaving patterns of ploughed earth and, on a hill beyond the low-lying town, a white tower with sails that do not move. On the river a ship, sails wrapped, swings at anchor against the tide's run. A square looking punt lies tipsy against the muddy bank.

From across the river he hears a familiar sound; one he's heard before at the white man's dock on the island. It's the rattle of chains binding men to each other. His eyes follow the sound. A line of men, overseen by soldiers with guns, is marching along the river's edge. The sound of clanking chains comes clear across the wide river. He watches the chains being removed by the soldiers and the convicts, freed for the moment, begin their work. From a flat barge at the water's edge they roll huge timber posts on to the shore. The boy has never seen trees that would yield such posts. Other sounds cross the river: the sawing of wood, the hammering of nails and the hard ringing sounds of metal on metal and the crunching sound of breaking rocks.

The old man directs an oath towards the white men, then turns and leads the boy away. They go along a narrow footpath that leads to a low point where the river turns sharply on itself, exposing a wide drift of silty sand. The old man and the boy stand on the soft silty shore gazing across the river to the other side where cliffs of bare red rock rise steeply up from the water. Tidewater surges seaward between the two shores.

This is not a good place to cross, the old man says.

They walk back upstream, staying close to the mangroves that line the river's edge. At a break in the mangroves they stop. The old man scans the further bank. The boy follows his gaze. Across the river, where the cliffs have eased down to flat land, is the entrance of a small creek.

We will cross to there, the old man says.

From among the mangroves they gather tide-washed sticks. From gumtrees further inshore they gather small branches. These they lay down in a grid. From a nearby waterhole they gather reeds. These they twine into the stick grid. In a short time they have made a serviceable raft. They push the flimsy craft off and make for the opposite shore.

Two soldiers, on watch along the riverbank, observe the travellers pushing slowly across the current. For a moment there it seems to the soldiers that the pair are gliding unsupported across the water, so low is the craft they kneel on.

Theys'll never bloody make it, says the first soldier.

Humph! says the second soldier with sarcastic venom None of ems will....

I takes your meanin, says the first. Even if they does manage to cross the bleedin river theys...well, doomed theys is.

Mind you, says the second, those two look in bloody good shape.

Wont be f'long, says the first.

True enough, agrees the second.

In a little wooden house not far from where the two soldiers tread heavy-booted along the river bank Georgina Bolan, wife of Andrew Bolan, Supervisor of Works for the colony, sits at her desk, her journal open before her, pen poised. But she cannot, just yet, find the words. Instead she gazes out the open window and across the garden and its little vegetable patch to the river. It sparkles in the late afternoon light. Mangroves line the opposite bank. Beyond the mangroves the darker green of sub-tropic bush rises up from the banks all a-tangle. On the river, too far distant to make out clearly, she sees what looks like a pair of natives on a raft.

Georgina Bolan watches as the raft eases its way across the river. She continues to watch until the raft and its passengers disappear into the trees along the riverbank.

The afternoon draws on. Still she sits, her mind not so much blank as, well, roaming. This tendency to wander, often to once-fond places she'll never return to, has become quite common of late. A steam whistle blows. Georgina starts. It's the *Sovereign*, a steamer that has become a vital link between this small outpost and the wider world. She watches the paddle steamer pass downriver. She wishes she were on it, heading back to the old country.

Still Georgina Bolan sits, wasting time. Finally, with a deep sigh, she dips her pen in the ink and begins to write.

16 May 1839

It's two years now since we arrived in this place of condemnation. I have not got used to the loneliness. I am one of the few free women in the settlement, all of us wives of officers or officials. The rest of the population is either convict or low rank soldier. Apart from the uniforms I see little difference between them.

I have just returned from a short walk. The day was just too delightful to stay indoors, or attend to the garden. It is surprising how dark this house can be, even on days like these that are full of light and gentle breezes and the most beautiful scents. One does need to go beyond the confines of the garden, which for all its delights, is limiting. My walk today took me past the barracks and the jail (how hideously dark and grim it looks with its great stone walls and tiny windows). I stopped at North Quay. It is always interesting there, watching the activity along the wharves. It is a pleasant scene, with the great sweep of the river there and the light glinting off the water and the sense of things happening. It is pretty too, the river banks crowded with strange vegetation, and the pale blue hills to the west and, beyond them, the mountains. One wonders what is beyond. There is talk of a great inland sea.

I try to see the place through Andrew's eyes. He believes this rough convict colony will soon become a free settlement with a sound future. He says that he, as one

of the few free men here, is in a good position to benefit from the inevitable expansion that will come. To this end he works long hours and I am often alone.

The problem is that while I would like to feel as he does I am, on the occasions I do venture out, confronted by sights that disturb me and therefore lessen my enjoyment of what otherwise should be pleasant walks. Today, as I walked above the new wharves, I heard the call of a man, quite rough, and the terrible sound of a whip against flesh. That I knew this sound was in itself cause for concern, for I have had the unfortunate experience of seeing a public flogging of some three poor creatures whose crime, I fear, was not so great as to warrant torn flesh and public humiliation. But this was worse, for as I rounded the bend I saw Mister Piper standing there, seemingly in command of this dreadful punishment. I saw his face and there was no compassion on it. I do not know the extent of the crime committed, nor do I care. I only know that I immediately turned for home.

I am worried because it is to this same Piper's place we are going tonight for dinner. Piper is, among other things, in charge of convicts. He is, from all accounts, not a very nice man. There are so few free men here that we must try to get on with each other as best we can. Piper's wife, Jean, is a small woman whom I have met only twice at the local store. She seems quite timid, even frightened.

I must end now. Andrew and James will be home soon and I would like to do some singing practice (it is all I have until the piano arrives) before getting dinner ready.

Georgina Bolan closes her journal. She goes to a small music stand, opens the music sheet, clears her throat and begins to sing.

The soldiers gone, the old man guides the sodden raft into the creek and beaches the thing on the muddy bank. They go along a narrow path bordered on one side by a rough paling fence. Beyond the fence is a garden with vegetable patches, young fruit trees and beds of brightly coloured flowers. It is the first formal garden the boy has seen. Beyond the garden is a house made of wooden slabs with a high-

pitched thatched roof. From inside the house comes the sound of singing. It is a female voice, high and clear and sweet. Intrigued by these sights and sounds the boy stops. He tries to imagine the kind of life that is lived within those walls and if it is as pleasant as it sounds. On the island the only white people he saw were males who seemed to be of two kinds: those who punished, and those who were punished. Now he understands that there is another kind; one that sings songs inside sturdy houses surrounded by neat gardens.

The boy is mesmerised by the beauty of the scene and that unseen voice. From the nearby river a ship's steam whistle blows. The singing stops. The trance is broken. He looks about. The old man has gone ahead! The boy races up the path to find the old man standing with three black men. The old man looks angry. The boy walks up to him and receives a stiff clip around the ears.

The other men laugh.

Come, the old man orders.

They leave the three black men and come to a small stream that runs clear and fresh down from a forested hill. Several black people are gathered round a fire on one bank. Two older men, wearing remnant white men's rags, sit a little apart from a group of women and children. The women wear an assortment of ragged clothes and dirty blankets. The children are naked. One woman is breastfeeding a child. Further upstream, at a distance of no more than twenty paces, two white men are drawing water from the creek into a round metal container mounted on a cart.

The two groups do not acknowledge each other.

By the side of the fire lies a singed wallaby. Bits of cast-off bones are scattered about. Flies are everywhere. The boy is offered some burnt meat, which he greedily accepts. The old man has moved away and is in deep conversation with the other men. The boy's attention is drawn to the white men who, having completed the loading of the cart, are moving off. One of the white men looks directly at the boy and winks. The boy involuntarily responds with a smile and a wink of his own, a gesture he immediately regrets and hopes the others have not seen. One of the women

yells abuse at the departing white men, who respond with rude gestures. The women cackle merrily, as if they've scored some small victory over the white men.

The boy is bemused by this strange exchange.

The old man leaves the other men and calls the boy after him. They walk down a wide dirt road and into the shadow of a great stone building. In its towering sides are narrow window slits blacker than night. From inside the building comes a loud oath followed by a shriek of pain. Other muted but equally frightening sounds echo off the hard bare walls of the interior. Cries of anguish and the sobbing of grown men communicate unspeakable terrors through these heavy walls. The boy thinks about the house he'd passed and the happy sounds that had come from within it and how different they were from the dreadful sounds that now come from within the high stone wall before him. There are questions he wants to ask the old man but he can see that the old man is in no mood for questions regarding the white men and their ways.

They walk on, the terrible sounds from the prison fading into the background, only to be replaced by an altogether different sound. A horse and cart is coming down the road towards them, the rhythmic beat of horse's hooves setting the earth vibrating, the great iron tyred wheels crunching over the gravel. The old man and the boy stand beside the road as the thing bears down on them, the boy watching open mouthed as it approaches, the large long head of the beast rising and falling in time with the motion of its powerful legs, it's mad eyes staring straight ahead. So quickly it comes. So much to take in! So much for the boy to marvel at! There's the sheer strength of the beast; the rippling muscles of the animals mighty flanks, so smooth yet so powerful. There's a flash of polished trappings and a blur of leather blinkers. On the cart, high above the great wheels, three figures sit; a large man in a tall dark hat, a woman in a white dress and matching white hat and a child about the same age as the boy. Sparks of flint fly from the great wheels and there are smells new to the boy; smells of animal sweat and wood varnish and, yes, the faint smell of something sickly sweet emanating from the woman. The boy stands all a-tremble by the roadside, taken by the strange passing.

The old man fixes a steady gaze on the white man up there on the cart. And in that brief instant of eye contact the white man doffs his hat. The black man, in his turn, nods imperceptible. There passes between these men of different worlds a wordless and mutual acknowledgement of each other. There is also time enough, in that brief passing, for the black boy to acknowledge the white boy's half smile and to know, in the way boys of such ages do seem to know such things, that they will meet again.

The horse and cart pass on, trailing a cloud of dust. The old man walks away, calling the boy after him. They come to the top of a hill overlooking a hollow. In the hollow dark figures sit in small groups round burning fires. Smoke from the fires drifts lazily into the cooling evening air.

Barrambin, the old man says.

And tells the boy how, in the days before the white men came, people would come from far and wide to this place, which was also called Wallan by some of the people, to dance and sing and tell their stories but that most of all they came for the warrior fights.

The old man points to a long scar running down his right thigh and tells the boy that he got the wound at Barrambin and that he was cut to the bone but that he had killed his opponent, a warrior from the west who'd killed his uncle in an earlier fight. The boy acknowledges the scar and the old man's obvious pride in it. The old man then tells the boy of the great ceremonies that were held after the fights and how they went on through the night and how there were gatherings of people in numbers such as the boy could not imagine.

But his voice breaks and he looks away and the boy sees that the old man is deeply troubled.

All gone, the old man says wearily.

And the boy knows that there is no point in asking what he means.

Under a darkening sky they go down into the hollow. Old people sit motionless around fires, young men stand around in small groups, dogs prowl menacingly and children's cries echo off the farther hills. To the boy Barrambin

seems a dark and desolate place. The people seem listless. An old woman appears out of the gloom and asks if they are going to the bora. The old man nods.

Might as well come and join us then, she says from a toothless mouth. You will be warm by our fire.

They follow the old woman to her camp where several people are gathered round a blazing fire. A pack of mangy dogs snarls briefly at the new arrivals then, sensing no danger, and being lazy curs, settle back with their noses to the ground. Around the fire are three women wrapped in stinking possum furs; the youngest cradling a small child. The other two sit on either side of the mother like protective aunts. Two old men sit cross-legged, staring vacantly into the flames. A tall young man, who seems to be the camp guardian, stands a little apart, his left foot resting on his right knee, a tall spear gripped in his right hand. Three young children play games with lengths of string. Beyond the flames a small group of older children with runny noses chase a small dog.

The old woman grasps the boy's shoulders with her bony hands and tells him that he is a fine looking young man, just like her boy who has gone on ahead with his guardian to the bora. The boy lowers his head to hide his discomfort at the old woman's intimacy. She is so like his own mother this woman. But this woman is going to the bora to farewell her son. For the first time since leaving his island home the boy feels forsaken.

Come, the old woman says, seeing the boy's discomfort, it is time to eat. And then you shall sleep, for you have far to go.

The boy finishes his meal of charred meat and lies down between two dogs, thankful for their warmth. He is tired but his mind races. He keeps seeing the horse and buggy and the white people on it. Other images come too: images of the town and its buildings, of fences that block his path and of roads traversed by strange contraptions. These things bother the boy as he twists and turns on the hard ground. And all the while, beyond a fog of tiredness, come the sounds of the camp: the soft chatter of women, the snorting of dogs, cries of children and the murmured dirge of

some old man. The camp sounds fade. All is quiet. Somewhere an owl hoots. The boy falls asleep.

I stop reading. She's gazing out over the bay, lost in thought.

I can see him, she says. The boy. He seems so real. Who is he?

There's a book called 'Early Moreton Bay', I tell her. Written by a man called Thomas Welsby who used to boat on the bay in the early days. He got to know the people of the bay and wrote about them. There's a character in that book that was the inspiration for the boy in my story. There are books and articles and occasional papers from which you can get a reasonable picture of life in the early days. 'Tom Petrie's Reminiscences of Early Queensland' is one of them. That's by Constance Campbell Petrie. I've pinched a character or two from that book as well.

Never heard of those books, she says. There's so much we don't know about our own history.

There's a lot of stuff in those books Mary. But no one reads them. Well, not many.

Were there any living people, she asks, who influenced you?

A couple, I say.

Who, she asks.

A kid called Duncan.

Who's he, she asks.

A kid I met over on Straddie. Aboriginal. Islander. I was thirteen...

I close my eyes, remembering so clearly the way that whole wonderful weekend panned out.

It's Friday lunchtime, Woolloowin State School, May 1954, Billy Drahaam, Gary Lee and me down the back of the schoolyard talking excitedly about the weekend ahead, Colin Clark ambling over asking what we're so excited about, Billy Drahaam saying we were going camping on Straddie with the Kalinga scouts, Colin Clark saying you'd better be careful 'cause the 'abos' will attack you and Gary Lee asking how he knows and Colin Clark describing how he'd gone there with the

Nundah scouts a few months before and how they were attacked on the first night just as they were settling in and Gary lee saying bullshit and Colin Clark saying you wait and wandering off looking for other kids to pester and it's late afternoon and we are on the *M V Mirrimar* at North Quay, a merry mob of us on the top deck watching the city slip away, the old wooden tub beating down river, all excited as the boat passed under the great steel cantilevers of the Story Bridge and on down the New Farm reach and the ships lined up along the Newstead wharves past and round the great bend into Hamilton Reach, stopping at Hamilton Wharf to pick up more passengers before sailing down the last wide reach of the river and the ships lined up along Brett's Wharf and the fertiliser works at Pinkenba and the oil refineries lit up like fairylands on either side of the wide river mouth and out into the vast darkness of the bay, a bunch of kids on the top deck, leaning on the rail, transfixed by the lights along the distant shore while on the front deck a bunch of teenage boys and girls are singing

We were sailing along...

On moonlight bayyy...

You could hear the voices singing

They seemed to sayyyyyy...

the voices drifting up and spiralling out into the night, the singing stopping, just the slap, slap, slap of the boat against the waves of the bay, and I'm asking Gary Lee what he thought of Colin Clark's warning about being attacked and he's shouting bullshit, the others are gathering around wanting to know what was bullshit and I'm repeating Colin Clark's warning a bunch of kids huddled together on the top deck of the rocking boat debating the pros and cons of Colin Clark's story until the first of the big Pacific swells come in through the passage sending the boat skidding sideways and Billy Drahaam and most of the others are going back below decks leaving a few of us brave ones on top of the rocking boat, revelling in the excitement, the boat smack smacking into an angry chop driven in from the Pacific until suddenly it's quiet and we are in smooth waters, barrelling down the deep channel along the dark

lee of the island to Dunwich and we're on dry land again, struggling to keep our balance, laughing Billy Drahaam crying out the land is moving and Gary Lee, not quite in on the joke, saying it's just your sea legs stupid, everyone playing up the sea-legs pantomime even as we are boarding the old island bus, bouncing along the rough and incredibly dark island road and we are setting camp under dark pines, getting a fire going for a late dinner of damper and snags and billy tea before bed but I can't get to sleep, sitting near the tent flap peering out into the pitch-black night listening to the whispering pines, the only light an eerie glow between the trees seeming far away that is only moonlight on water but beautiful like a shining light calling me to a magic land far away and the campfire is gone to ashes and the lamps are all out and I'm crawling into my sleeping bag and drifting off to sleep only there's a sound I think might be possums fossicking for leftovers but it isn't possums because there's someone out there, maybe more than one, coming towards the tent and I'm remembering Colin Clark's warning and waking Gary Lee whispering there's someone out there, the others beginning to stir, asking what's up and I'm hissing for them to listen because we're being attacked and Jimmy Reid who liked his sleep is sneering that I'm imagining things and for a moment there I'm thinking maybe I am and that I'll be in trouble for waking everyone up Gary Lee is saying there is someone out there and it's true, dark shapes are darting between even darker bushes, all the time getting closer and someone is flashing a torch and in the beam we see them, black figures coming towards us and hothead Jimmy Reid is yelling grab some weapons boys were being attacked and we are gathering outside the tent, holding axes, shovels, knives and whatever else we can get hold of, peering into the gloom not knowing what to do and there's a long silence and nothing moving, the silence going on for ages and in that waiting, not knowing what to expect, waiting in fear and dark figures are coming towards us, torchlight shining onto leering faces and we are about to run for our lives only there's laughing coming from the faces and one of them is saying scared you didn't we and the others are laughing and gathering around and suddenly we are laughing too and someone's saying let's boil a billy and we are

getting the fire going, sitting sipping mugs of hot tea and eating arrowroot biscuits and the kid with the torch is saying my name's Duncan and making a little speech welcoming us to Straddie, which he says is their place and that we are visitors but that we are welcome and it's later and most of the kids have drifted off, our mob to the tent and their mob to wherever, leaving me and Gary Lee and Billy Drahaam with Duncan and his mate Midge sitting talking for ages until a voice from the tent yells go to bed and Duncan is saying if we want he and Midge can come back in the morning and take us to the ocean side and its morning, breakfast finished and the dishes done and Duncan is there with Midge saying you blokes coming and we are in the back of Duncan's father's old Land Rover bouncing over the rough island road to Cylinder Beach, Duncan's father saying he'll pick us up at five at the top of Frenchman's Beach and we're walking along the sandy shore against a stiff southeaster towards Deadman's Beach, Duncan stopping and pointed north across the passage to the southern tip of Moreton Island looming out of the surf mist saying my mother's people came from there in the days when the two islands were joined which was before you whites came, and there's something about Duncan and Midge that I like, something about the way they move, the way they seem to belong to the place in a way I never really belonged anywhere, that beneath their easy manner is an inner strength I find compelling because they are proud of who they are which sets me wondering who I am and where my place is and we are at Frenchman's, climbing to the top of the cliffs looking out over the Pacific, the wind blowing hard and wild and fresh, the surf crashing and gulls wheeling and Midge is pointing out over the water to a white blur flying just above the waves saying albatross and it's the first time I've seen the open Pacific and it's vast and I'm imagining strange lands way out there beyond the horizon but Midge is yelling above the wind you blokes ever caught ugaries and we are at the edge of the surf, twisting our feet into the wet sand beneath the retreating waves, feeling for the smooth hard surface of the bivalve and slow Billy Drahaam is yelling got one and reaching down and pulling a small shiny bivalve out of the wet sand and holding it up triumphantly and Midge is saying they make good

bait and we get enough we can go fishing later and we are back on Duncan's father's ute heading back to camp and it's night and we are fishing from an old boat in the bay just round from the campsite and taking a good catch of Whiting back to the camp and cooking the fish in pans over an open fire and they are the best tasting fish I've ever had and it's the last day and we are packing to go when Duncan and Midge come round saying they have something to show us saying it won't take long and we are following them along a track through dark forest and suddenly we are at the edge of a tidal pool into which a stream of pure fresh water is flowing and it's the most beautiful places I've ever seen and Duncan is pointing across the pool to a pile of broken seashells sparkling white against the tidal mud and he's telling us that it's a midden and that it's the remains of the feasts of the old people and we are wading across the pool and standing before the midden which is hundreds of shells all broken and bleached and Duncan is saying I'd show you.

Penny for your thoughts, she says.

Just remembering, I say, breaking out of my reverie, about Duncan...

Did you ever see this Duncan again, she asks, staring out over the bay.

I tell her that I never did, but that I wish I had.

The sun is arcing west. The tide has turned. The breeze has picked up. I suggest we go back but she says she's not ready, that she likes it here, that it might be the last...

She doesn't finish the sentence. I ask if she's all right. She doesn't answer, rises from her seat and goes over to the sea wall, stands gazing out over the bay. From where I sit I see an older woman, still slim and still attractive. I go to her. We stand together for a long time at the edge of the sea, small waves lapping below, neither of us saying anything.

What were you thinking Will, she asks, breaking the silence.

Nothing much, I reply, just those old memories.

That all?

Oh, there was something; a midden that Duncan took us to. I think of it sometimes; not so much the midden itself, but the whole occasion.

You always were strange Will. Off in your own world half the time. Never could figure you. Never could understand what you were thinking.

We drive back to the city and stop outside my apartment building. I put my hand on the door handle and am about to open the door when she puts her small hand on my leg and says, that was nice Will.

I put my hand over hers. I feel an immense sadness.

Well, she says eventually, guess I'd better go. George will be wondering...

I get out, wave goodbye and go up to my apartment, pour a drink and wander out on to the balcony, sit there thinking about the day just gone. Visions of Mary come and go. There's an early one from primary school days. She's walking with me along Kent Road when a large Dalmation dog suddenly jumps at the fence. The dog is inches away from Mary and growling. It gives Mary such a fright that she instinctively clutches at me. There's one from several years later; we are at the beach and she's in her tiny red bikini running laughing into the foaming surf and disappearing under a wave. For a long time she doesn't surface, causing me to panic. I run into the water and she jumps up and wraps her arms around me.

I'm suddenly very tired. I raise my glass to nothing in particular and go inside.

4

April's nearly over and the weather's turned at last. The intense humidity of the past few weeks has gone and there's even a slight chill at night, especially out on my southeast-facing balcony. This afternoon a southerly is blowing and, for the first time in ages, I'm wearing a jumper. I think about the changing seasons (such as they are in this subtropic town) and I think about Mary and I think about friends like Bill and Gary and I think about time passing. So many idle thoughts, none staying for long. I give in to lassitude. A car horn blows. Voices drift up from the street below, clear yet oddly disconnected, as if from some other place; one I'm not part of. This is what it was like as a child sitting on the front veranda of the old house, mind drifting.

Daydreaming again Will, calls a voice.

It's my long-dead father, ghost-like on the front veranda. He's on his way to work, his old Gladstone bag in one hand. My mother appears on the veranda, also ghost-like, saying leave the boy alone Al, there's no harm in dreaming. My father winks at me, turns and goes down the front stairs and along the path.

The phone rings. It's like a shot. I go inside, pick up the receiver. It's Mary. She's back in hospital. There are complications, she says. I tell her I'll come right away.

Not today Will, she says. George is coming. Tomorrow?

Sure, I say. Tomorrow night.

I rise early, breakfast in a rush and sit at my desk, my manuscript open before me. I'm hoping to make a few alterations resulting from my last reading but I can't concentrate. I can't get her out of my mind. I said I'd see her at seven, which is hours away. The day drags. Unable to settle, I decide to walk. I go through the busy streets to King George Square, stand in front of the city hall, gazing up at the clock tower that used to be the tallest building in town but which is now dwarfed by surrounding sky-scrapers, remembering my father's unsuccessful tilt at a seat on council. He was

unsuccessful; a Labor man contesting a Liberal seat. The city hall and its tower seem small now and, well, distant. Another time, another era.

I go up Ann Street past Central Station. It's early peak hour, office workers on their way home streaming in through the various entrances, while, from the bowels of the station, young people stream out, some still in school uniforms, some dressed up, come in from the suburbs for an evening in the city; young women exposing too much flesh and eager to get to dark interiors where music throbs and romance blossoms; young men with tattoos and don't fuck with me faces. They pass me by. I'm struck once again by the realisation that I'm not part of their world. I'm invisible!

I press on. A drunk lurches out of a bottle shop. We collide. Fuckin cunt, he swears, then goes lurching away. I'm not part of his world either. A group of young backpackers – German by the sound of it – pass by on their way to the People's Palace. A man in a suit walks by with a smart woman in black, both talking excitedly into their mobile phones, oblivious to the passing parade. At St John's Cathedral, which is closed to the public, a white-faced heron struts across the courtyard, jutting beak and staring eyes, on the lookout for prey. It's an unexpected sight. I watch the bird's slow pointed progress across the holy ground. It stands beside a garden bed, beak poised. In a flash it strikes. A lizard disappears down the bird's gullet. The bird moves on, neck craned, eyes staring, constantly on the lookout.

All things wise and wonderful, all creatures great and small...

I continue on down Ann Street and cross the busy intersection to Centenary Place, go along the path beneath darkening trees, past Robby Burns' statue and across Gotha Street. I pause here, gazing at a section of stone wall that was once part of the never-completed Cathedral of the Holy Name. The site is now a multi-story apartment block. I go into the reception area and ask the woman on duty if there's anything left of the crypt (the only part of the cathedral that was ever finished). She's southern European, recently arrived, and has no idea what I'm talking about. Forgotten history!

I walk on into The Valley, grab a quick take-away in Chinatown, then head on round McWhirter's where once the tram wires almost obliterated the sky, and up

Brunswick Street past the old Museum building whose ornate structure always reminded me of The Raj and on over Bowen Bridge to Bowen Park. From beneath the shade of a Poinciana I gaze across the busy road to the massive façade of the Royal Brisbane hospital where I was born and where both my parents spent their last days. Somewhere within that vast self-contained city is the ward where Mary lies dying.

She's in a different room; just her and a young woman who looks terrible. She looks up from a book as I approach and smiles. I place the flowers I've just purchased from the flower shop on the ground floor on her bedside table, kiss her lightly on the cheek, and sit down.

You're looking good, I lie.

Can't believe what's happening, she says. They say I'll have to have a breast removed. At my age! Still, shouldn't complain. The woman over there – she indicates the young woman in the opposite bed – is going through the same business and she's only thirty something.

A familiar feeling insinuates itself: a dread sense of loss. It seems everyone who's meant anything to me has either passed away (strange phrase 'passed away'; the more I contemplate its meaning the less I understand it) or is on the way. Even hale and hearty Billy Drahaam has a heart condition and his great weight doesn't bode well for a long life. And I have my regular colonoscopy!

Life, death and the dunny man is coming!

Penny for your thoughts...

I laugh, tell her I was musing on the absurdity of life and death, which perhaps wasn't the best thing to say in the circumstances.

She laughs, coughs, reaches for a glass of water on her table, sips some, puts the glass back, tells me I'm silly sometimes.

A nurse comes in, checks the chart at the foot of the bed, says something I don't quite catch, goes away.

She's from Sri Lanka, Mary informs me. Only been here a year...

Very pretty!

Yes. Aren't they all!

I reflect, once again, on this odd phenomenon where all the patients seem to be of European background and all the staff are anything but.

We chat about this and that, filling in time.

Well, she says, you'd better begin. I know you are dying to tell me more.

I laugh, take out the manuscript, open at the right page and start to read.

Georgina Bolan, unable to sleep, rises from her bed, wraps her nightgown around her, looks down on the dark lump of her sleeping husband for a moment then walks quietly to her desk by the window. It's near midnight and there's not a light anywhere. It's quiet, apart from odd and disturbing sounds emanating from the prison. Moonlight shines on the river's surface, creating shifting patterns. The current seems strong in this light. It carries her along, mind racing with the tide. Georgina Bolan lights a candle and opens her journal. She stares at the thing for a while, adjusting her eyes to the dim light. With a sigh she dips her pen in the well and begins to write.

August 1839

So much has happened these past few hours. I must write it all down before I forget. Earlier this night we dined with the Pipers. Since that time I saw him in charge of the public flogging at the North Quay I have tried to avoid him. But Andrew insisted we go, saying that he and Piper were among the only professional men in the town and needed to get along. This is such a small town. I do not know Mrs Piper - Jean - all that well, having only spoken briefly to her at the store. I never see her out and about, which is a pity. There are so few people here one can talk to.

The evening started rather strangely. On the way to the Piper's house we passed a pair of natives; one an old warrior with deep scars across

his back and chest, the other a boy about James' age. I was struck by how handsome they were. Compared, that is, with most of the poor black beggars you see around the town (and even our own convicts for that matter! They stood beside the road as we passed by, so close I felt that I could have reached out and touched them. It is difficult to describe my thoughts and feelings, except to say that there was something noble in the old man's bearing. And something in the boy that stirred my maternal instincts.

Oh, the thoughts that crossed my mind! I was unsure how to respond, so looked straight ahead. Or pretended to. Andrew, I noticed, doffed his hat ever so slightly and I am sure that I saw a faint smile break, for just a moment, on the hard set of his jaw. It was, in retrospect, a strange passing, and while it only took a moment, the scene remains vividly in my memory. I had a great urge to somehow recognise the pair, by a wave or some such indication of fellowship. But I made no such move. I am sure I must have looked the picture of snobbishness.

From my seat on the side nearest the black men I smelt the bittersweet smell of unwashed flesh mixed with other things I could not pin down. Apart from the huge scars across the old man's chest and shoulders he had what I thought was a bone through his nose and a string of shells round his neck. I was struck by his taught muscles and by the rude dimensions of his exposed member. There was something primeval in it all; in the smells and in the way he stood. Yet there was a certain dignity there; a sense of pride that I had not noticed before among these people, especially in the poor creatures that sit forlornly wrapped in blankets, begging in the dirt of the unfinished roads of the town. This man may have been quite old but his body was firm and strong and unbowed. I could not help it, but it came to me; a vivid comparison between the old man's fine figure and the saggy whiteness of my own husband's body, a

body that is nevertheless probably in better condition than that of most of the drunken males in this place.

Something stirred in me, something deep within, something strangely pleasant but also frightening. I am still a young woman, although married all these years to man I sometimes think I hardly know, and with growing children. I am sometimes subject to thoughts that are, shall I say, improper! It was not so much the man's nakedness that caused my discomfort but a sense of wildness, of freedom and, yes, potential.

The boy, I noticed, seemed in awe of us. He had such bright eyes! I found that moving. Here was a boy of similar age to James, but one who faced an uncertain future. I wondered about his family and what he was doing there with the old man. I suspect he had hopes of his own. I hope that they will not be dashed.

I don't know what James thought of the encounter. Perhaps it meant little to him. After all, he was eager to meet Charles, the Pipers lad (he does need someone his own age to play with).

The visit started off on an oddly depressing note, brought on by the sight of the young woman who welcomed us. She wore what passed for a servant's dress and a badly starched white apron. She smiled at us but I could see that behind the forced smile lay a deep resentment towards the world. I instantly felt sorry for her. I guessed she was a convict farmed out to the Pipers as a kind of slave. I suppose she had come, like so many others, from some terrible Irish slum, providing, along the way, comfort for the settlement's lower ranks. I am perhaps assuming too much but all I know is that that encounter was upsetting. The not-quite-white uniform could not hide the sad coarseness of the young woman's small care-worn features. There was something there that spoke of deprivation and, possibly, abuse. And yet, when I looked more carefully

(not too obviously I hoped) I saw a face that, under different circumstances, could have been pretty. However, she seemed courteous enough as she led us, breathless, up the path to the veranda where Reginald and Jean Piper stood waiting.

At certain times of the year the nights here can get quite cool. Last night was such a night and so it was good to be inside with a small fire blazing, in surroundings that approximated homes that I was once used to. It amazed me how the Pipers had managed, with such limited resources, to emulate the crowded interior of an English home. I was envious. Our place, by comparison, seemed rather empty. Andrew, I'm sure, would have seen it as stuffy.

After some formalities we were sat around a small dining table spread with surprisingly fine dinnerware. The maid (who was not introduced but whose name I later learnt was Molly Doolan) served a large roast and piping hot vegetables. Reginald Piper had either sacrificed a rare beast for the occasion or had been luckier than we had been in procuring fresh (and tender) meat.

Jean Piper commented that the boys, at this point playing outside, seemed to be getting along well and expressed the hope that they would become friends. At the time I heartily agreed but a brief conversation with James on our return cast doubt on that ever happening. Apparently Charles had proposed a game that involved killing 'those savages', meaning the native people. James, who has formed friendships with some of the native children and can speak a little of their language (there is a kind of musical tone to the soft rounded vowels) did not appreciate Charles' attitude. It is sad to think that in such a small town two boys of similar age cannot get along.

On reflection, they are completely different in their natures. I sometimes think that James, in a different society, might have developed dandyish ways. This though makes me smile. But James is sometimes difficult, especially of late. He normally has a happy and open disposition but sometimes I fear he is starved for interest. Charles Piper, on the other hand, is solid and strong like his father and, if James is right, has the same quick temper and prejudices. Something tells me that he will come to a bad end.

As for the Reginald Piper, he is a bully and, I suspect, treats both Molly and Jean badly. At one point during dinner I mentioned the fact that James often played with the black children and that I wasn't sure how to feel about it. Reginald took my comments the wrong way and made it known, quite loudly, that he was concerned at the increasing numbers of them coming into the town with their constant begging and laziness. He went on to suggest that he'd be pleased to see the complete extinction of their race. When Andrew objected, stating that they were protected under British law, Reginald changed tack and proposed that they be herded together and sent to some remote place out of sight and mind. Perhaps, he added, some mission station could be set up where they could be taught Christian ways.

Andrew is a hard man in many ways but Piper's attitude was too much for him. Andrew reminded Reginald that Oxley had claimed that the lives of the natives were superior in many ways to the lives of those living in the slums of London and that their society was, in many respects, superior to our class ridden one, that they lacked the evil temptations of property. I was not aware that Oxley had made such comments but was pleased to hear them repeated by Andrew.

Jean, sensing trouble, attempted to change the subject but was cut short by her livid husband who, red of face, spat out words like damn

nuisances, more trouble if nothing was done, drunken good-for-nothings...

At this point I interrupted, telling the Pipers about the natives we'd encountered on the way over and how they had seemed healthy and alert. I told him that he was mistaken to take too general a view regarding the black people and that the two natives we passed were not pathetic creatures, that there was a certain nobility about them.

I looked over at Andrew, expecting a reprimand of sorts (Andrew might have his ideals but he is at the same time careful not to alienate people, even those as loathsome as Piper) but I swear he was hiding a smile. Jean Piper, on the other hand, was ashen-faced and obviously frightened (I was concerned for her). When I looked back at Piper his face was crimson with rage. But I wasn't afraid of him and said that I hadn't finished. I explained that the couple we saw were in good health and that he (Piper) had to understand that we had taken their land and, therefore, their livelihood, that I didn't know what their future as a people was but that we had a duty, under British law, to protect them.

Piper, spittle flying, said something like, 'And if their interests conflict with our interests? What do we do then? Lie down like dogs and let them do what they will. They are cannibals. I have that on good authority...'

The air inside the house, already warm from the stove and the open fire, was made warmer by the debate. Jean's cheeks were flushed. She seemed breathless. I suggested opening a window, which Piper did, somewhat reluctantly (acting on the suggestion of a woman was apparently not something Piper was used to). A breeze wafted in through the open window, carrying with it a faintly tropic air and the smell of rain.

I don't know how to explain the feel and smell of rain on warm air. It is not something experienced in England. All I can say is that it feels as if

one is being caressed and it is quite beautiful. The effect on everyone was immediate. Piper, calmed by the breeze, offered Andrew some whisky (obtained, no doubt, through dubious means). Andrew agreed to partake on the insistence that it be just one small one for the road. Jean suggested tea for the women.

In that small, rough but comfortable house, with its outer skin of solid weatherboards cut from local trees, its rooms heavy with English furniture, its dusty drapes, ornately-framed pictures of English countryside, and all manner of knick-knacks assembled by Jean from whatever source she could, we sat sipping our drinks. I don't know what Andrew was thinking but I just wanted to get away from the place.

But the evening was not finished, with Andrew and Reginald talking of practical matters such as the need for more building and the shortage of supplies while Jean and I spoke of the children and their futures here in the colony. We were in this way entertained when a gust of wind entered through the open window, surprising us with its strength. Piper sniffed the air, announced that rain was coming. Andrew rose, said we'd better go. But before we'd made ready the rain came. It beat down on the tin roof, heavy and unrelenting. Piper closed the window, turned to us and said, in what I thought a malicious way, 'Looks like you are stuck Bolan'.

The boys, who had been playing outside in the dark, came in dripping wet and stood with their backs to the fire, their wet clothes steaming. Something about their manner told me that they had not got along well. Jean Piper suggested that we stay the night but Andrew wasn't having that. Nor was I. I'd had enough of Reginald Piper. The storm was mercifully brief. As soon as the rain abated we left.

Looking back I see the visit as rather unfortunate. This is such a small settlement and there are so few here who are neither soldiers or convicts. I shall have to try to avoid Reginald Piper but I feel sorry for Jean. I also worry about James...

Georgina Bolan yawns and stretches. She's tired. With a sigh she puts down her pen, closes the book and goes to bed.

Down in the hollow the boy is stirring. He rises out of a deep sleep, rubbing tired eyes. The sun is shining brightly and the smell of cooked game meat hangs in the air. He stumbles towards the fire and gulps hungrily at a lump of meat offered to him by the old man. Only when his hunger has been sated does he look about him. Apart from the old man there is no one in the hollow. The only movement is a bullock wagon stacked high with bundles of hay trundling slowly north along the white man's road at the far end of the hollow. He follows with his eyes the drays ponderous progress until it disappears over the far rise, then turns to the old man and asks where the people have gone.

You slept too long, the old man says. The others have gone ahead.

They scatter the ashes of the fire and go from that place, heading towards the western hills that, at this early hour, are shrouded in a blue haze. Around mid morning they enter a broken country of tall trees and steep gullies. Cicadas buzz and whipbirds crack and the high branches of trees rub against each other alarmingly in the breeze. Out of all this background noise comes a vaguely familiar sound. It's the sound of axes striking wood. As they near the sound they hear white men's rough voices. From the shelter of the bush the old man and the boy watch the land being cleared. Great logs lie scattered among the debris of broken branches and crushed undergrowth. The boy senses the old man's futile anger at what is being done and tries to hide his own fascination. They work hard these white men, cutting and sawing and hacking at that bit of bush until there are no trees left standing. The old man and the boy watch from the cover of surrounding bush as three great logs are loaded onto a bullock wagon and

hauled away, wagoner's curses splitting the unquiet air. The old man directs his own curse at the white men and their destruction, then calls the boy on.

They follow an old and almost imperceptible track along a narrow creek that winds through rugged country of tall trees and pockets of dark rain forest. In a small clearing in this rugged country Timothy Biggs, ticket-of-leave convict, and his unwed wife Jane O'Shea, recently released from the women's prison, are hard at work trying to make a go of some reasonably fertile land they'd got by way of a deed of grant. It is Mr Biggs, in the business of inspecting some corn he'd planted near the creek, who first notices the two black travellers on the far bank. He silently beckons to his wife who is squatting nearby tending a row of freshly planted potatoes. She goes and stands beside him, watching what seems at first an apparition.

Timothy Biggs notes the fine physique of the old man and the potential in the skinny boy. He sees that they are part of the land in a way his people, with all their machines and all their strife, will never be. He recalls how he'd suffered harsh punishments as a convict and had cause to curse those who brought him to this hot southern land, how he'd escaped one time and fled into the bush after one too many floggings, only to encounter a country he did not know and in which, starved and delirious with thirst, he'd nearly perished. He recalls how he'd woken one day to find himself lying by a fire wrapped in an old blanket in a black's camp and how he'd been sheltered and fed by those people who brought him back to health and how he'd travelling the backcountry with his hosts and learnt as he went a bit of their language and their ways and how he became like them, all black from the sun and without clothes, and how one day he'd realised that he was a burden on them and wandered off and eventually found the hut of the man called Ryan who'd once laboured with him in chains under the tyrant Piper and how Ryan had been shocked at his appearance. And Timothy Biggs recalls how Ryan had told him that Transportation had ended and that if he played his cards right he'd be pardoned and get a grant of land like others had and how he'd gone to the town in Ryan's cast off clothes and worked on the docks and on the building sites and how, over the space of one year, he'd saved some money and how, with a reputation for hard and honest work, he'd

earned a pardon and a grant of land and he recalls how he'd met the woman he calls his wife and how they had come to this place in the virgin bush but he'd never forgotten the old people and how they had saved him from death.

Jane O'Shea looks to her husband. Despite her own rough and occasionally cynical disposition she sees in her otherwise rough and cynical husband a certain sensitivity she had not hitherto encountered. She sees how he is looking on the passing travellers and she too is touched. In the quiet stillness of that small place they have hacked out of that once-fecund scrub, the two ex-convicts stand together. For a long time they stand, long after the old man and the boy have passed into the mysterious and difficult bush.

With a shrug of his broad shoulders Mr Biggs picks up his hoe and begins an earnest assault on the earth. Jane O'Shea walks back to her potato patch and resumed a less than enthusiastic planting of the vegetables.

Deep into the valley they go, following tracks laid down long ago. As they go the boy's anxiety grows. Soon he'll be at the place of his initiation. He has seen the signs, seen other black people moving through the land, all going in the same direction. Until this moment he has not thought deeply about the object of this journey and had never considered that it might involve a multitude. The path leads on through rugged foothills beyond which he sees, every now and then, the blue ramparts of the western mountains. They cross small creeks lined with dense undergrowth out of which the moronic calls of Pheasant Coucals come to mock their slow progress. The boy is tired and desperate for rest. Still they keep on, going deep into the valley until, with the sun easing down behind the western ranges and casting long cool shadows across their path, they find themselves in open country at the top of a ridge. Below, on a broad flat creek bank cleared of vegetation, a great crowd of people is gathered.

Kupidabin, the old man says, indicating the scene before them. The place of your initiation.

They go down the hill and through the crowd. Women look up from their chores. Men stand in silent regard. Children stop their play and stare as the old man and the boy pass. They do not stop but continue across the creek and up the opposite rise. Near the top the old man stops and turns back towards the camp. The boy stands beside him, gazing down over the gathered multitude. It is, he feels, a cheerful scene, one strangely at odds with the seriousness of his purpose. Old women sit cross-legged in front of makeshift shelters. Children race about chaotically. Mangy dogs yap and snap. Older dogs sleep by smouldering fires on which the carcasses of freshly caught game lie, singed beyond recognition. In a clearing by the edge of the creek is a great circle surrounded by fires. Within this clearing dancers move to the accompaniment of clapping of sticks and slapping thighs. Beside each campfire are piles of freshly caught game. The smell of singed meat permeates the air. The boy is hungry but the old man turns and calls the boy on.

They continue on to the top of the rise and follow a narrow path along a curving ridge. Tall trees rise from either side of the path, their tops forming a dark canopy. Light beams stream down through the gaps casting moving shadows across the ground. As they go muted sounds from the camp rise up. They seem far away. The path opens to a broad clearing in the centre of which is a great circle of raised earth. On the top of the ring's curving embankment eleven boys sit facing the centre of the ring, their faces cast down. They do not look up at the boy's approach. The old man guides the boy to a vacant place on the mound and bids him sit, whispering as he does that he must be strong and silent and never look up until he is directed to do so.

Then, without a word, the old man goes away.

The boy casts furtive glances at the boys on either side of him but they do not respond. And so he sits, not daring to speak or move, wondering if the other boys are as frightened as he is. The afternoon draws on. Sounds and smells from the camp drift up from the valley below. Night comes. The sounds of the camp fade. All through the long night he sits, trying not to move.

Dawn comes cold, bringing with it a frightening noise that echoes through the trees. One moment it's like a wild and wounded beast, the next moment like a savage

wind. Now it hovers overhead. Now it trembles in the ground. The sound rises and falls, then rises and falls again.

It is the buggaram.

It stops. All is quiet. Nothing moves. The risen sun floods the centre of the ring with light. The day grows warm. From the camp he hears, as if from far away, the high-pitched calls of children and the scolding of mothers, the deep bass of men's voices chanting to droning didgeridoos and clapping sticks. Sweet smells of roasted meat rise up the ridge to where he sits, lonely, hungry and frightened. The day draws on like the last. He drifts into a trance-like exhaustion. When he opens his eyes it is dark. Lights from fires down on the flat reflect off the trees, casting weird shapes, adding to his fear. Despite his anxiety he drifts into a deep sleep.

And wakes to the cry of birds, cold and stiff and sore. Beyond the bird sound all is quiet. No sound comes from the camp. The people have gone. He knows now that the trials are about to begin. They sit, these boys, all in a circle round the ring, their heads bowed, waiting. For ages they wait. All is quiet. Then, out of the shadows of the surrounding bush the birdmen come dressed in white bird down from head to feet, elaborate helmets of bird feathers on their head. They stamp and jabber and circle within the ring, even as fires flare up miraculously they dance, stamping between the fires in a maddening and giddy dance, until one of the birdmen breaks away and comes across the ring and stands before the boy. Deep within the white painted face dark eyes stare out. The boy wants to look away from those frightening eyes but he knows he cannot. So close is the birdman that the boy can smell his stale breath. The birdman taunts the boy but the boy does not cry or turn away and the birdman utters a savage curse and returns to his dreadful dancing. Somewhere unseen, women wail. Wilder and wilder the birdmen dance as twelve women step up onto the embankment and stand behind the boys, waving leafy branches over their heads. The birdmen stop and glare at the women who throw the branches over the boy's heads into the ring where they lie like offerings. The birdmen take the leafy branches and hold them over the fires until they smoke. They pull the blackened smoking leaves off in bundles and crush them in their bare hands and bring the hot and sticky leaves with

their smell of eucalyptus to each of the boys and rub them all over in slow and methodical movements that the boys know to be a signal and that soon they will be taken away from the women who stand silently and empty-handed behind them.

The birdmen leave the ring and the women step away. All is quiet. From the path an old warrior comes into the ring. He stands in the centre, looking about. He fixes his gaze on the boy, comes and stands before him, holding out his hands. The boy takes the proffered hands and the old warrior pulls the boy to him. The boy staggers on legs made almost useless from so much sitting. But he is young. Blood pounds through his veins, reinvigorating limbs and tired muscles. He is strong. He will get through the trials. He stands with the warrior in the centre of the ring. Other warriors come and lead the other boys into the ring. They stand there, bunched together, twelve boys and twelve warrior guardians in the middle of the ring.

A call like that of a bird is heard and the boys are led away. They go in single file down the pathway of the kippas. But, before they have gone far they are stopped by a blockade of women. They are fierce-looking these women, with their shaven heads and eyes of stone, standing resolutely across the path. The guardian warriors shove the boys behind them and stand before the women. The women reach round the men screaming and yelling and pulling at the boys. But the guardians hold firmly to their charges. Beyond the high-pitched screaming of the women and the fearful oaths of the men is heard a different sound; a low rumble that seems to come from the very ground they stand on. And as the struggle continues the sound intensifies, becoming a high-pitched wail that now comes from the trees above their heads. The guardians and the women stop their struggle. The awful sound rises and falls; now a low growl coming from the earth, now a whirling wind high up in the trees.

It is the buggaram!

It now comes like thunder, hovering above their heads, now rumbling across the ground and into the earth. It is everywhere and nowhere, one moment close and angry-sounding, the next moment far away like distant thunder, now coming across the ground, gathering pace and volume as it nears the mob. It is a frightening noise. The women let go of the boys and run.

He is running, running and running through a world he does not know. His bleeding feet hurt but the pain seems far away. He goes on, following his guardian on and on through a bush that flashes past in a blur, running, running and running until it seems that it is not he who is running but the bush that is flashing past, his own poor feet pounding the earth like disconnected things. He is beyond hurt.

The guardian stops. He turns to the boy, reaches out his hand and gently lifts up the boy's head. The boy's eyes, so long focussed on the ground, are at first so dazzled by the bright light that he cannot see. When his vision clears he sees a man standing by the base of a huge tree, its smooth white trunk reaching up to the sky. The man is naked apart from a hide belt into which is inserted an axe. In one hand he holds a rope. He comes towards the boy, holding the rope outstretched before him. The boy reaches out to touch the rope but before he can it is snatched away. It is like a cruel joke and he doesn't know how to react. The boys are gathered in a ring around the tree, their guardians behind them. The man with the rope goes to each boy in turn, goading them. It is a test of nerves but they do not flinch.

The man approaches the boy again, staring into his face, but the boy returns his stare. It is hard, this thing he is enduring. He wants to cry, to run away. But he must not. The man goes to the base of the tree. He looks at the boy. The man's eyes are like those of a bird of prey. They pierce the boy. The man turns and slings his rope around the trunk and hauls himself up. So swiftly he climbs. Near the top of the tree he stops and looks down on the boy. The boy gazes back up in wonder. To each boy in turn the man directs a piercing gaze but the boys do not flinch. The man ties one end of the rope to his foot and the other to a higher branch and swings out clear of the trunk, hanging upside down, supported only by the rope. He takes out his axe and begins to hack at a bee's nest.

He is the honey-gatherer.

Even as the boys watch enthralled a second man appears above the honey-gatherer, his black body painted with white stripes. His cruel eyes dart about. He looks down at the boy and snarls. The boy shivers in fear. To each boy in turn he casts his evil glance, until they are all staring up in fear. Then, in one swift

movement, he brings his axe down on the honey gatherer's supporting rope. How easily it cuts. The boys watch in disbelief as the rope snaps. It seems an age that the honey-gatherer hangs there unsupported, high above the ground. And for a moment there it seems to the boy that he will not fall. But he does fall, thudding into the earth. And as he does a high-pitched and triumphant call comes from the treetop.

The boys are led away with no explanation for what they have witnessed. They run and run through an eternity of bush that cuts and scratches. It seems forever they run, eyes to the ground for they are bound to never look up. Suddenly they are stopped and told to look up. They are in a small clearing surrounded by thick bush. In the centre of the clearing sits a monster. Its black eyes stare stupidly back at the boy who is held by its vacant stare. It is only a dummy made of sticks and grass and feathers, all grey green against the grey green bush; but the eyes, so real, so seemingly human, stare out at the boy. He shivers. An old warrior appears and circles the thing, every now and then casting glances at the boys. The warrior continues his circling, sizing the dummy up as if it were a real threat that he has to overcome. There are deep scars of battle across the man's back and chest, telling of a long life of bitter conflict. The warrior comes towards the boy, who shrinks back until he is pressed against a tree, unable to move, caught in the spell of the warrior's eyes. The warrior's thick finger prods the boy's chest. It hurts and he wants to cry out but knows that he must not. So he stands accepting his punishment. Satisfied that the boy will not yield the warrior goes to another boy and repeats his cruel torture. But this boy too stands firm. He goes to another boy, and then another, until he has teased each one. But none give way and the boy is pleased. They are united in adversity and have held their will.

Then, with a dreadful cry, the warrior turns and races at the dummy, striking at it with fierce blows of his waddy. It is a frightening thing to watch. And as the warrior strikes at the thing, as the fury and the intensity of his attack increases the dummy becomes a living, breathing and threatening force and the old warrior does seem to be fighting for his life. For a long time the warrior attacks the dummy, every now and then breaking off his attack to threaten the boys. Then, with one last great

effort, he holds up the battered remains of the dummy and flings them down on the hard earth, leaving a pile of sticks and grass.

They follow a narrow path beneath a canopy of darkness and come to a ring of earth. It is like the one he'd just left, only smaller. He looks up. From the ground in the centre of the ring rises a tall tower made from an inverted tree trunk, its roots fanned out and bound together with sticks and reeds to form a platform. On this precarious platform stand six tall warriors covered in bird down. Around the base of the tower the boys run while, high above on the tower's swaying platform, the old warriors stand chanting in a slow and steady rhythm, all the while pulling small round stones from their mouths and throwing them over the boy's heads into the surrounding bush. Over and over they pull forth the stones. Round and round the boys run. They are fierce these old men, with their eyes of stone and their sharply jutting beards and their long white hair, swaying up there on that precarious platform, chanting their strange song and pulling forth the stones. Even as the boys continue their circling and the old warriors continue to call forth the stones and cast them out, young warriors come from the surrounding bush and pull and push at the tower with their hands until it wobbles and begins to fall. And the boys are led away, glancing back as they go at the tower slowly falling and even as it falls the old warriors continue chanting and calling forth the stones.

He is running, on and on he goes through a world that is unfathomable. Many times he is stopped and shown things. There are giant effigies of pregnant women and kangaroos and all manner of animals. But they do not linger and nothing is explained. All the boy can do is take what he can from each experience.

They are led towards a great fire. Thick white smoke issues from the fire and spreads like fog across the clearing. From out of the fog vaguely familiar figures emerge like ghosts, stay for a moment before the boys, then recede back into the fog. They go into the fog, led by their guardians. On they go through a world of whiteness until they emerge at the edge of a steep gully. They stand in a line, staring out over the depths from which rise tall white-trunked trees. The boy turns to his guardian but there he has gone. All the guardians have gone. They are alone; a line of boys facing

across a steep gully. From thick undergrowth on the far side of the gully comes a long drawn out whistle followed by a tapping sound like that made by two sticks. The sound dies. All is quiet. Nothing moves. The waiting is unbearable. Now, out of the bush white figures appear, silent as ghosts. They come slowly across the gully. Their feet seeming not touch the ground, floating silently through the towering trees, coming on towards the frightened boys like malevolent spirits. They stand close before the boys, belligerence in their eyes. The boy smells anger. The white figures stamp about the ground before the boys, growling oaths and kicking up the dirt with their feet. Dust rises in little clouds about them so that they seem to hover above the ground. The boy senses movement behind him and turns, hoping to find his guardian. But there is nothing. When the boy looks back the spirit men have gone. Leaving a silent bush and a sensation that they were never there.

The boy's guardians reappear and beckon them on. The boy is running, following his guardian as if in a dream. But it is not a dream for his feet hurt. They come to an open space surrounded by tall trees. At the far end of the space white smoke swirls up from a long line of fires. From out of the smoke twelve warriors rise and come towards the boys, shaking spears and shields as they come. The boy turns to his guardian but he has gone. The boys are alone again, facing the advancing warriors, holding weapons that have miraculously appeared in their hands; weapons they have never used. A warrior runs towards the boy and throws a spear. It lands before the boy. From somewhere he hears a call. Throw, the call says, throw! He throws his spear at the warrior. A great battle ensues. The boy is not afraid. He is exalted. He races madly about with the other boys, dodging spears and picking fallen ones from the ground and hurling them back at the warriors. On and on the battle rages until one of the warriors is struck on the thigh and falls to the ground. The warriors pick up their fallen comrade and retreat. The boys rush forward, shaking their spears and yelling wildly as the retreating figures vanish into the smoke.

They race about the fires, whooping and calling and scattering the dying embers with their bare feet until there is nothing left of the fires and all is quiet. Nothing moves. The boys stand together in the middle of that field of battle, waiting

expectantly. Out of the surrounding forest the birdmen come swinging their instruments of wind. Round and round the boys they dance, spinning the buggerams until the whole space is full of sound. Closer and closer the birdmen come, spinning and spinning like mad things. Until one by one they fall from giddiness. The boys take up the buggarams and go running spinning madly across that great space, spinning and spinning until they too fall to earth.

He rises from a deserted field. He is alone. There is only the sound of the wind in the trees. There is no sign of any other boy, nor is there of any fire or birdman. Exhausted, the boy sits down on the earth. His strength returned he tries to rise but something holds him to the earth. An old warrior appears, comes to the boy and holds out his hand. The boy takes the proffered hand and is lifted up. They go through tangled undergrowth that tears at his skin. On and on they go until they emerge, torn and bleeding, into a moonlit gully cleared of trees. On a flat bit of ground on the other side of the gully the boy sees a long line of fires. A full moon shines down, casting weird shadows across the ground. Behind each fire is a seated figure. The fires flare, casting giant shadows of men against the black forest behind. From out of that blackness comes a single figure grotesquely bent. Firelight plays on his distorted face as he stomps, bent-over almost double, one leg drawing slowly and deliberately after the other, between the fires and the seated men, holding his genitals and moving his groin as in the act of copulation. The boy is shocked. Another figure appears, gyrating and stomping along behind the first. Then another. And another. Until there is a long line of men stomping between the fires and the seated figures, a long line of genital-clutching men going from the darkness on one side of the clearing to the darkness of the other side. They pass into blackness. There is silence. Nothing moves. The fires flicker. The squatting figures stay immobile and silent. The boy waits. The other boys are beside him but he feels utterly alone and vulnerable.

They come again, the same rude figures, emerging from the dark bushes into the clearing, stomping rudely between the fires and the seated figures. One after the other they come and one after the other they disappear into the blackness of the other

side. Over and over they repeat the dance. It is maddening. The boy wants to run away. But he cannot. He stands with the others, waiting for the dance to finish.

It finishes. The seated figures depart. There is just blackness and silence and smoke.

A call is heard. Go, it says. Go into the smoke.

He is running with the other boys, shouting out as they run towards the fires, filling the air with noise. They go into the smoke and through to the far side where he sees a camp with women and children. They pay no heed as the boys run on until come to a dark place where dark figures dance in huddled stomping gaits, their hideously twisted and leering faces turning slowly from side to side to an unheard beat, making lurid and provocative movements of their naked bodies, going back and forth in a slow and unchanging and unending dance of worm-like procreation. Terrible scenes unfold. Wild dancing men and mad women fight and scream. There are dreadful scenes of fornication and distress. On and on the dance goes, until an old warrior appears and stands in the centre of this terrible chaos. He stands there silently until, one by one, the dancing multitude stops and, one by one, slide away. There is not a movement anywhere. Even the trees are still. The old warrior takes the boy's hand and draws him away.

They go along a creek that runs over smooth round stones. The creek bubbles along to his own heart's beat, drawing him on. He is beyond exhaustion. He comes to a long narrow grove surrounded by tall trees whose white trunks glow in the moonlight. At the end of the grove twelve fat men sit in a semi-circle, each one holding a strip of hide and beating a steady and monotonous rhythm on the earth, chanting a song that goes on and on. The old warrior takes the boy's hand and leads him to the seated men, who stop their chanting and look up. The boy looks down into those wise old eyes and knows that he is being judged. The old men motion for the boy to come closer. He stands before the old men who look up at the boy. For a long time the boy stands before the old men. One of the old men opens his mouth and calls out a word.

Jabiru!

The sound of that one word rings through that place. From high in the trees comes an answering call. It is like an echo.

Jabiru!

The boy stand mute as the calls continue, first from the men before him, then from the trees.

It is his name!

He is Jabiru!

He is a man!

He is running and running; running he knows not where. He is exalted! He needs to run. But he is stopped by a strange woman who stands before him. She is proud and fierce, this woman, with her short cropped hair and her long thin stick bound at one end with a tufts of hair and feathers. She is intimidating, too, with her eyes of stone. But the boy is proud and strong with the knowledge of his name. He breaks away from those strong eyes and dances around the woman who might otherwise possessed him; dances in gay abandon, defiant and strong. Until she stamps her foot and raises her rod with its end bound with hair and feathers and points it at him and he is like a child again and he goes meekly up to her, caught in the spell of her eyes. He reaches out and pulls from her rod the tuft of hair and feathers and places it under his arm. She points to a great fire from which rises a white smoke.

Jabiru, she says.

Jabiru, he replies. And goes towards the smoke.

I stop reading and close the manuscript.

She opens her eyes. Phew, she says, that's some story!

You were listening then?

Of course! I'm intrigued. Where did you get all that stuff about monsters and birdmen and – what was it – honey-gatherers falling from trees...?

From lots of reading Mary. Old stuff. Early settlers' accounts mostly, some first hand, some second, maybe even third hand. There were people, way back in the mid eighteen hundreds, before any such thing as a state of Queensland existed, who

were inquisitive enough to write down what they saw. They thought they were being objective. Maybe by the standards of the day – maybe even of today – they were. What they wrote down and, in some cases published, are the only records we have of those days.

I'm stumbling to explain that what I've been reading to her is a mix of fantasy and reality.

So, she says, interrupting, it's a kind of history.

It's just a story Mary. But one which, I hope, contains some truths within it. The way I see it the bora, or kippa-making, or whatever the ceremony was called in the various places it was performed, was not unlike our confirmation. You know: a kind of coming out...

Oh *that*, she exclaims. I really had no idea what *that* was all about. We were confirmed on the same day, weren't we Will. 1955 wasn't it? God, that was ages ago. Do you remember?

How could I forget?

It was one of those clear early winter mornings that Jock MacAllister the Scotsman who lived next door used to say were God-given. Weather's the reason I stayed, I heard him say once, talking across the fence to my father in his thick Scottish brogue, while at the same time indicating with his heavy red-haired hand the clear sky and pronouncing, You can stick your Glasgow sleet and snow. It was odd, the way he was so proudly Scottish and yet swore he'd never go back. Went back once, he said to my father. Never again!

Those were the days before everyone had cars, when the Sunday morning streets were silent and the air was still and sweet. Silent it was, a palpable, almost physical quiet, as if your ears were part blocked. You could drift away on mornings like those, daydreaming on a veranda chair or leaning on the veranda railing staring out over the park, mind drifting out past the houses on the far side of the park, gliding low over houses, streets and parks, over Ascot and Doomben racecourses all the way

to the airport and on over the rivers mouth, floating over the bay, over the islands and into the blue Pacific Ocean, going past New Zealand all the way to South America.

You could do that; let your mind wander in the days before things were expected of you.

Such was the morning of my confirmation. But I wasn't out on the veranda where the sun was shining in, I was inside where the sun didn't penetrate, standing in front of the dressing table mirror dreading the arrival of my grandmother who was going to come with my mother and me. What bothered me wasn't the uncertainty of the occasion, the meaning of which I had no real understanding of, but the thought of my hypocritical father out there in the yard yapping with Jock, enjoying the sun with no intention of going to my confirmation.

My mother came in, telling me to hurry up. I asked her why my father wasn't going. She said he had to umpire the football, then went out adjusting a new hat she'd bought for the occasion. I knew that football wasn't the reason he wasn't going. My father hated the church, especially my mother's church. He was lapsed Catholic and was always railing against the church. Bunch of hypocrites, he'd claim. Obviously he wasn't happy about my looming confirmation into what he called the church of the empire.

Go eat your bread and drink your wine and bow down to Elizabeth, the Empire's Queen.

That's what he said. He could be sarcastic, my father.

I was torn between adolescent love for my mother and admiration for my father's fervently held principles. I thought that I'd inherited my father's anti-establishment sentiments and sided with him on political matters but it wasn't that simple. The anti-British principles I'd inherited from my father faltered on the day of the Royal Visit. I'd gone with the rest of the school, lining up along the road to see Her pass. When She came, finally, in the big black open car I found myself running alongside with the other kids shouting and waving a little British flag until She passed out of sight, leaving me panting and embarrassed. I'd let the side down. What would

my father have thought if he'd seen his son cheering on the Queen of bloody England?

I looked in the mirror, wondering why I should be subjected to this confirmation thing and why I had to wear those ridiculous woolly short pants, sticky even at that cool hour. And the stupid long socks. And the tie with the Windsor knot I couldn't get quite right. And the shiny black shoes. A walking penguin is what I was. It was the same mirror that I sometimes sketched myself from. I did a really good drawing once, a good likeness I thought, but I didn't show it to them because I knew I'd only have received the usual insincere response, a flippant, Oh, that's very good Will, such a good likeness.

I thought of my grandmother, who I liked. Grandma, she always insisted, call me Grandma. Couldn't call her Gran, or Granny, or Nan or any of the names other kids used for their grandmothers. Tried Gran once. Got hauled over the coals. Had to be grandma. Not a bad old stick, my father used to say. Heart's in the right place. Which was, right then, to get me through the confirmation ceremony. She lived in a Housing Commission house that my father said was built low to the ground to save costs. It was always dark inside that house, with Grandma always in the kitchen preparing something to eat while my grandfather, who we called Pop, lurked in the background and hardly ever said a word. Head in a book most of the time, they'd say. Never could tell with him. Silent type: curly grey hair, hairy ears. Worked in the public service. Clerk. Soon to be retired.

I could hear Grandma's heavy feet coming up the front stairs, her slow puffing as she climbed, one step at a time, carrying her great weight up after her. My mother called and I went out and stood at attention while grandma inspected me.

I said I looked like a penguin. My mother, standing with her new hat on and pulling on gloves, saying, You look lovely dear.

My father, sitting in the sun at the far end of the veranda, newspaper open on his lap, cast a sly wink in my direction and said cheerfully, ready for the big day Will.

Good morning Al, Grandma said with just a hint of sarcasm in her voice.

My father said it was indeed a good morning, one far too good to be wasting in church.

Grandma forced a smile, turned and pinched me on the cheek saying, Take no notice of your father Will.

She did that every time; pinched me on the cheek. I hated it. Didn't she realise I was going on fifteen. Then, with a sterner look, she asked if I'd memorised the catechisms. I said I had, but I hadn't. Then she asked me if I had the book. I pulled the little red communicants manual from my jacket pocket, held it up for her to see.

Good, she said, I hope you've read it Will, and that you know what to expect.

Truth is I hadn't studied it at all and wondered when the difficult questions would come. They didn't, thankfully, due partly to the fact that grandma's attention was diverted by my mother asking if she'd like a cuppa. As if: not! Soon she was seated and sipping loudly from a strong cup of Bushells tea with lots of milk and sugar that mother had prepared specially for her.

That was another thing: cups of tea. It had become a custom for me to bring my mother a cup of tea on certain mornings after my father had left for work. She'd be sitting out on the veranda in the sun waiting. I'd bring the cup out on a saucer with a scotch finger biscuit, only to be told that it was too weak and I'd have to go back and adjust the thing to her rigid specifications. It happened often.

This particular morning it was my mother who was serving and my grandmother who was asking for a little more milk please. By the time the tea had been fixed to grandma's satisfaction and duly drunk it was time to go.

Grandma sighed (she loved her cuppa) and slowly rose. Goodbye Albert, she called to my father as we set off. Sorry you are not coming.

Nice the way she emphasised the 'bert' bit of his name, put a lot of sarcasm into that. Everyone else called my father Al.

We went down the front steps and along the cement path my father had painted bright red, between the roses my mother carefully tended and through the steel gate that was one of my fathers foreign orders from the shipyards. It was something he was inordinately proud of, that gate, even though it had never been

properly painted and still sported its red oxide primer. I didn't look back because I knew that my father would already have retreated back to his chair and his precious Sunday papers. We walked down Roseleigh Street past all the wooden houses with their wooden stairs leading down from empty wooden verandas, going awkwardly along the narrow foot-formed path through still-damp grass. At number 15, the only brick house in the street and therefore considered by everyone to be a bit grand, we stopped. Mister Owens, in the front yard tending his garden, looked up.

Good day Mister Owens, offered my mother.

Mrs Traverse! Nice to see you. And you, Mrs Trefall! And you Will! How nice to see you on this fine morning. Almost a frost this morning, but look at it now. Warm already. Good to be out. Off to church are we?

Will's confirmation, grandma confirmed matter-of-factly. Then, looking over the garden, added, Your roses are so beautiful Mister Owens. So hard to grow them in this climate.

Right soil and proper care, Mrs Trefall, does the trick, especially this time of year. Love the winter sun, they do, said he, sweeping his one good arm across the whole garden (Mr Owens' left arm was stunted from Polio). So its confirmation is it? Important occasion, said Owens the Jew. A good thing it will be young man. Part of growing up. I wish you well.

I thanked Mister Owens who once caught me stealing paw-paws from his front yard and told my father. My father wasn't happy that I'd stolen paw paws but he didn't like dobbers. He's a Jew, my father said to me later. Changed his name. I don't trust him. Works for the bank. That was another of my father's pet hates: the banks. Which ought, he'd say to anyone who'd listen, to be nationalised. Once, at dinner, he said something nasty about Jews. And what, my mother wanted to know, was wrong with the Jews. Hadn't they suffered enough. And anyway, what could Mr Owens do about the banks? He just works there.

I could see that my father was a bit taken aback by this response. Then, to add insult to injury, my mother added that Carl Marx was a Jew and wasn't he supposed

to be one of my father's inspirations. This really floored my father, who was usually the sharp-tongued one!

The inexplicable ways of the world! There was Mister Owens, who didn't like me and who my father called a Jew as if the world was divided into different kinds of people, talking to us friendly as could be. I was too young to understand things like that. It was the same at school; the way we State school kids walked on one side of the road on the way home from school and the Catholic school kids on the other. There were enemies everywhere. My father had lots of enemies I heard someone say once at one of the dining room sessions in the days before the election loss. That was news to me. He seemed to be friends with everyone, including the Greek man in the fish shop at Kedron who my father spoke to in Greek. Or pretended to. They were on our side, the Greeks, my father said. Working class people have got to stick together. Only there was Mister Owens and grandma chatting like old friends, even though they were from different religions.

Well, we had better be off Mr Owens, grandma said by way of goodbye. Can't miss the tram.

Fine, Mrs Trefall, he replied. See you next time.

And, maybe forgetting my name, added, and all the best to you young fella.

Then, turning to my mother, added, Bye Mrs Traverse.

Mister Owen and his house didn't fit that street of working men and housewives. He was a single man and bank manager with pretensions that manifested themselves in a brick house and a spotless garden and a new Wolseley that he parked in a proper garage, not under-the-house like most of the others. He wore a suit every working day and kept to himself and, according to gossip, never married after being turned down by a childhood sweetheart. Mister Owens was a person to avoid and the truth was that I didn't like the man who lived alone in that big brick house.

We were turning the corner heading for the tram stop when Horrie Hyde, football umpiring friend of my father's, came bounding round at fast jog. Horrie Hyde propped like the well-trained athlete he was, apologised profusely for having very nearly mowed us down, and offered a hearty good morning.

Lovely day for it!

Grandma, puffed from the walk, couldn't remember the man's name for the life of her.

Hello Mister Hyde, I said.

She remembered then: he was that football-umpiring friend of my father. Grandma disapproved of football. Waste of time, she'd said once. Just another excuse. For what I never found out.

No football today then? she said, sarcastic like. Such a nice day for it too.

Horrie Hyde, somewhat taken aback by this display of indifference to his obsession (it was early, after all, and the game was more than four hours away) responded pleasantly, Game starts at two o'clock. Mayne Oval. Bulldogs and the Tigers, Mrs Trefall. Important game.

Then he turned to me and said, You coming along Will?

Don't know, I muttered. Dad is, I think.

So, where are we off to then, asked Horrie the Hyde.

To the church, replied grandma. For Will's confirmation Mr Hyde. We have to catch the tram. Has one gone yet, do you know?

Oh, that's quite something Will. Confirmation. Be a man then, what! Oh, the tram... No, hasn't gone. Should be along any minute Mrs Trefall. All the best then. Give my regards to Al.

Which, as I said, is what everyone called my father.

Seated in line along the tram stop bench seat with us were: a Chinaman who worked for Gary Lee's father in the market garden on the other side of Kedron Brook; a bent old man I'd often see wandering painfully across Melrose Park bent almost horizontal; and a girl about my age who, to my horror, I realised was Mary Wright. She was with her mother and they were dressed for church. I pretended not to see her, looked instead to the intersection where, just five weeks ago I'd seen the motorbike come belting up Junction Road and ram straight into the side of a car coming out of Kent Road. I'd watched in horror as the bike rider sailed through the air, over the car and onto the road on the other side. It was spectacular and awful. People came

running out of the grocers and the butchers and the chemist and the ambulance came and the trams were held up for ages. Soon after that Council workers came and put up stop signs and there were no more accidents on that corner. Years after in dreams I'd see that motorbike rider sailing through the air.

But Mary Wright right there, and looking really pretty.

It was one of those days that start off silent and continue silent. And still. So still that you seem to move through the world as if through a separate reality, as if somehow you were not part of it. As if the world was somehow not quite real. On days like those there seemed to be an unbridgeable gap between you and the other things of the world; days when you feared that if you reached out and touched something, anything, the whole bubble that was the world might shatter. That day was like that.

Only there was this confirmation thing, and Mary Wright was going to be there!

In a kind of desperation I looked across the road at the closed shops and the empty footpath and thought how small and contained our world was. I'd never quite looked at the world like this; that is, from the detached perspective of a tram stop on a quiet Sunday morning; had never considered the smallness of it all. I was even aware, in my adolescent way, of a kind of ephemeral beauty in the rotting weatherboards, rusting roofs and fading advertising signs that constituted our little shopping centre (there were no supermarkets then). Harold and Stan Tate ran the grocery with their wives Margaret and Edna. Old man Tate, who had started the business long ago, and whose first name I never knew, spent all his time out the back sorting things. He was all bent from years of lifting and packing. There were three shops in that strip. On one side of the grocers was the butcher with his sawdust floor and fly trap and on the other side was a cake shop that was once a hairdressers shop. On the diagonally opposite corner, in front of the hospital, was a chemist and, opposite that, a motor garage. They were all family owned businesses. So much was invested in that one street corner; so many lives relied on what went on behind those cheap facades of timber, glass and tile.

The tram came and we got on, us through the front door, Mary and her mother through the back door. We got off outside the church, went in through the old wooden lych gate and up the path that led past the wooden hall where I used to go to Sunday School, worrying as I went that I might be asked to repeat the catechisms, which I knew I couldn't, that I'd freeze and not remember a thing and let grandma down, through the crowd standing about in their Sunday clothes, everyone helloing and smiling like they were all best friends. Mary Wright, chatting excitedly with some of her oh-so-grownup girlfriends, including Gloria Green, and into the body of the church.

In the foyer an old man pulled at bell ropes, the bells ringing out dong, dong, seeming as far away like they did on quiet Sunday mornings from the front veranda of our house. We found our pew and sat, mother on one side of me, grandma on the other, kneeling in prayer, people streaming in, women in Sunday hats and men bareheaded, all reverently bowing before the distant alter before sidling into the hard wooden pews.

I'm climbing the stone steps, going through the dark foyer past the old man pulling at the bell ropes, bells ringing out, seeming far away like they do on quiet Sunday mornings from the front veranda of our house, the church dark and mother and grandma gone to their pew, me with the other confirmees, Mary Wright and all, standing before the bishop whose asking us to renew our solemn promise made at baptism and to do all those things our godfathers and godmothers undertook for us and we are answering, each in turn, I do, the bishop saying our help is in the name of he lord, and we are replying, who hath made heaven and earth, the bishop saying blessed be the name of the lord, all of us replying henceforth world without end, the bishop praying about grace and strength and knowledge, filling us with the spirit of holy fear, laying his hand upon my head saying defend oh lord this child, only I'm not a child and I'm thinking of my atheist father back on the veranda of our house, ashamed before the bishop saying defend O Lord this thy child with thy heavenly grace that he may continue thine forever, the words a sing song pattern floating around inside the church and I'm kneeling reciting the lord's prayer, the bishop

reciting almighty god direct and sanctify and govern our hearts and bodies in the ways of thy laws and in the works of the commandments through our lord and saviour Jesus Christ amen, blessing me saying the blessing of god almighty the father the son the holy ghost be upon you and remain with you for ever amen and I'm Will Traverse, confirmed member of the holy roman and apostolic Church, walking back to the pew, my mother and my grandmother smiling upon me and I'm kneeling in prayer, light beams through the stained glass of the clearstory windows shining colours through the dust, the organ starting up and the bishop at the alter looking stern with his grey head and coloured robes, our rector old Brownberesford beside him looking grim, oh I could fly up along those light beams, fly into the mystery of the glass but mother is prodding me, whispering concentrate Will, everyone praying Our father which art give us this day as we forgive those who lead us not into but deliver us from evil, the words flowing one into the other, drifting with the dust particles up to the light way up there streaming through stained glass drawing me into its mysteries, grandma prodding me to concentrate the rector up there beside the bishop saying our father which art hallowed be thy will be done as it is forgive us our trespasses as we forgive them that lead us not into temptation but deliver us amen, the rector mumbling I am the lord thy God, the people replying Lord have mercy upon us incline our hearts to keep the law saying thou shalt not make unto thyself images have mercy upon us grandmas voice rising into the gloom the rector saying the commandments one after the other the people replying Lord have mercy the sing-song voices carrying me along beams of dusty light way up there oh the deep blue mysteries of the glass across which shadows fall which are only clouds moving across the sky or trees waving in the wind, grandma is shaking me, rising out of daydream to the rector's voice calling thou shalt have no other Gods and the people replying Lord have mercy keep the commandments and the rector saying so rule the heart of thy chosen servant Elizabeth our queen and governor that she may seek thy glory and that we her subjects may serve honour and humbly obey her through Jesus Christ our Lord who with thee and the Holy Ghost liveth and reigneth ever one god world without end amen the people replying I believe in the resurrection of the dead amen

lift up your hands yes lift them up unto the Lord o Holy Holy Holy, the church quiet, just the light through the window with its ancient figures drawing me in to the mystery of the glass and I'm drawn away, in the back yard of our house with the little black ball in the far corner by the fence coming rolling slowly rolling ever so oh so slowly towards me getting bigger and bigger, filling my vision until there is nothing but black and no light anywhere just a blackness all engulfing and I am about to cry out only grandma is nudging me, the rector saying almighty God heavenly father, the people kneeling saying oh Lamb of God that takest away the sins of the world everyone singing oh heavenly father who hast regenerated in baptism of the Holy Spirit complete in me what thou hast begun bestow upon me in confirmation through Jesus Christ our lord amen oh I longed to be outside not in the stuffy church which was like those stuffy hot nights after rain with the mosquitoes whining like the priest there whining drifting into the dark stillness of the night, the mosquitoes buzzing outside the mosquito net and mother tucking me into the hot breathless net and I'm struggling to breath in the hot damp air crying out in fear of the formless frightening things out there in the middle of the night mother coming soothing oh mother in the damp sweaty night leaving me tossing and turning lying stiffly staring into silent warm dark moist air, frogs croaking out in the rain wet park and the mopoke calling and I'm drifting to sleep only to wake startled by a Curlew scream like the scream of murdered children they said the lost children of the night, drifts of cool air wafting through the open door and curtains billowing and I'm drifting to sleep dreaming, only grandma is shaking me and I'm sitting up, the people singing our Father who art in give us this day forgive us our lead us not into temptation for thine is the Kingdom deliver us from evil the people calling amen, Lord have mercy, the rector warning the people saying thou shalt not unto craven images prey for I am a jealous god, the people replying have mercy, light bouncing off the bald head of the man in front of me bouncing colours everywhere, looking around at the older boys with hair darkened lips and girls with faintly made up faces giggling unable to stop and grown ups turning stern looks at small white hands covering smiling faces all trying hard not to laugh, the people singing louder oh Lord have mercy, the rector urging them on

saying honour thy father, oh thy days will be long in the land which the Lord thy God giveth, the people replying Lord have mercy upon us incline our hearts to keep the law, the people kneeling saying almighty God govern the heart of thy chosen servant Elizabeth our queen and governor that we may serve honour and humble obey her in accordance to thy blessed word and ordinance through Jesus Christ our Lord world without end, the people replying saying open mine ears and my heart that the words of the gospel may sink into my soul, the rector saying Jesus took bread and broke it and gave it to them saying take this eat this is my body, eat, and he's taking up a silver cup and raising it to his lips saying this is my blood and I'm kneeling before the rector taking the little wafer of bread into my mouth the rector saying the body of our lord Jesus Christ which was given for thee preserve thy body and soul unto everlasting life take and eat this in remembrance that Christ died for thee and feed on him in thy heart by faith and with thanksgiving and I'm sipping the wine all red and sweet, the rector saying the blood of our lord Jesus Christ which was shed for thee preserve thy body and soul unto everlasting life drink this in remembrance that Christs blood was shed for thee and be thankful and I'm back in my seat, the people walking back one by one to their places singing loudly I believe in one God the father only begotten son before all the world who for our own salvation came down the people I believe in the Holy Ghost one Catholic and Apostolic Church both for the resurrection and the dead and the life of the world to come amen, and old men coming down the aisle with wooden boxes passing them along the aisles, people dropping coins clanging metal on wood and metal the rector at the front busy with plates and cups brought in by a silent white robed boy, the rector placing wafers of bread on plates pouring wine into little cups and the silent alter boy going silently away, the rector lifting his voice saying let us pray for the state of Christs Church militant here on earth, the people kneeling saying oh mighty God who by the holy apostle hast taught us to make prayers and supplications beseech thee humbly beseech thee yes defend all Christian kings princes and governors and especially thy servant Elizabeth, people kneeling before the rector, faces lifted up in expectation, receiving the body and the blood and grandma now rising, going heavy laden in travail for the

bread and the wine oh Almighty God our heavenly father who of his great mercy hath promised forgiveness of sins to all them that with heavy repentance and true faith oh yes have mercy upon you and pardon and deliver you from all your sins confirm and strengthen you in all goodness and bring you to everlasting life through Jesus Christ our Lord amen, the people taking their bread and their wine and there's singing of angles and archangels and the company of heaven and shouts of Holy Holy Holy Lord God of hosts heaven, wafers of bread the body of our Lord Jesus Christ passed to waiting lips and red wine also to waiting lips, each and every one, having consumed the body and drunk the blood of the lord going one by one back to their pews, old man Brownberesford covering the remains of the host, the people singing oh my soul oh praise the Lord, voices rising and falling, half sung half spoken words tumbling out of mouths, oh the days of men are but of grass yes for he flourishes as a flower of the field for as soon as the wind goeth over it he is gone but the merciful goodness of the Lord endureth and it is long in the church and Grandma is prodding me and the light high up above is sparkling a complexity of colours and the voices are gently rising oh father which art forgive us our trespasses give us this day for ever and ever...

Will!

What Mary?

Wake up!

Confirmation? I guess it was important Mary.

It was just something we had to do, she says. Doesn't matter anyway does it, she adds wistfully. All that stuff about religion and the Church of England and standing up for God Save the Queen.

That's right, I exclaim. Standing up for the queen at the movies, when most of the movies were American anyway.

She goes quiet. I'm not sure what to say. I think about time and events in our lives and how both fade and how little it matters because, really, no one cares.

That was a magic year Will, she says, interrupting my gloomy thoughts.

Magic! What was so magic about that year, I want to know.

The school break up dance Will? That was pretty good.

One, two, three o'clock four o'clock rock... five, six, seven o'clock...

We were in the Kedron School of Arts hall and the music was belting out and I was leading Mary Wright round the floor, jiving along with all the other kids to Bill Haley and the Comets, amazed that she chose me in the girl's choice, she the most sophisticated girl in the class, if not the entire school! Everything was awhirl and I was jiving to the new music, vaguely aware of teachers and kids around the perimeter looking on, of big Billy Drahaam sitting there alone because no girl picked him, and anyway he was too awkward to jive. I, Will traverse, teenager, primary school graduate, no longer the boy I was just weeks ago, so much behind me and so much ahead. The *Boys Own* world of the pre-war British Empire was breaking down and we were moving to a new American beat.

Eight oclock, nine oclock, ten oclock rock....

Mary Wright was giving me strange looks as I spun. The room was spinning. Faces were blurring. Faces of kids I would never see again whizzed past, spinning into their own orbits. We danced well together, Mary Wright and me.

The last year of primary school was behind me. It seems like yesterday that the girls in my classes seemed so much older and bigger and more worldly than most of us boys. Among them I felt small and stupid. But now I was dancing with the prettiest girl in school and I was equal to the task.

I noticed Maureen Walker sitting alone and looking sad.

Little wallflower on the shelf...

It was funny, but in the brief second I passed by her I thought she looks pretty, but no one would ask her for a dance because there was something about her that was beyond understanding.

We danced on, Mary and me, having fun. Why should I worry about Maureen Walker.

I spied Spike Hennessy with his stupid bully mates Mick Laverton and Jonny Brinkworth, big kids who'd left school early and were already working and making money. I wondered why they were at the dance and guessed it was to cause trouble. We glided close by them and I tried not to look but Jonny Brinkworth yelled out,

What're you looking at pisshead?

We danced past a group of teachers standing by the corner. They seemed distant figures, no longer important, already beginning to fade from memory. Primary school really was behind me and I was spinning with Mary Wright, spinning into a different time.

The music stopped. Mary Wright kissed me, said that was nice, and went over to her friends; big girls all dolled up and looking grown up. Gloria Green was one. Gloria Green hated me and I hated her. I wandered over to where Billy Drahaam and Gary Lee were standing with soft drinks, the three of us standing feeling stupid and not knowing what to do.

The music started again and I looked over to where Mary Wright was but she wasn't there, she was on the floor dancing with Phil Brown the school long jump champion and captain of the football team. They whirled and spun, jiving to the music while Billy Drahaam, Gary Lee and I stood like dumb things pretending to enjoy it all. Gary Lee said it was a terrific dance but the fun had gone because she was out there on the dance floor with someone else.

The dancers spun past. Our teacher, Mister Greer, approached us smiling. Enjoying the dance boys, he said, and we are replying all together yes Mister Greer and then it was midnight and parents were arriving and Mary Wright was still spinning

Peggy-Sue, Peggy-Sue, oh how my heart yearns for you...

Will...!

Huh!

You were miles away again.

Just thinking, Mary. About the mysteries of life.

She chuckles, says I always was on about mysteries.

It's late. A nurse comes in and fusses about. I take my leave.

That was nice Will, she calls as I go.

I turn, blow her a kiss. It's an awkward gesture.

5

It's cool, the streets clean from an early downpour, the air sweet. I drive out of the city, windows down, wind ruffling what's left of my hair, heading west along Moggil Road through suburbs I hardly know, turn into Pullenvale Road, cross Pullen Pullen Creek (trying to remember if a repeated word in the old language means multiple or greater but since Pullen Creek is a tributary of Pullen Pullen Creek assume the latter) and head out along Grandview Road into rolling country dotted with expensive-looking estates and white fenced horse paddocks. After the rain the countryside looks Irish green.

Despite my age I'm feeling sprightly and looking forward to our meeting (it'll just be you and me, she'd said when she rang, George is away on business). I turn off the road and drive through an ornate gateway and down a long driveway to a paved parking area shaded by huge trees. I park the car and step out. Two great farm-type dogs come bounding down the drive, a female voice calling after them, Bumper, Prince... Heel!

The dogs stop just short of me, tails wagging.

Mary Wright comes panting up to me.

Whew! she says, catching her breath. Just been to check the mail. Thought I'd catch you at the gate but you drove straight past.

She kisses me briefly on each cheek, says Welcome to Wonderland.

By this stage the dogs - jealous I guess - are all over me.

Come inside, she says, shooing the dogs away.

We go towards a long low ranch-style house, architect-designed, circa 1970s. When new it would have stood out like a sore thumb but it's old enough to have settled nicely into its now fecund surrounds. We go inside and through a large open sitting room into a 'country-style' kitchen that's clearly well used.

Impressive, I offer.

George's domain, she says somewhat dismissively. I'm a hopeless cook.

I can believe that, but don't comment.

A drink?

I nod.

Pick one, she says, indicating a wine cooler. I'll get some cheese biscuits going.

I choose a screwtop white from the Margaret River.

Glasses are up there, she says, indicating a frosted glass cupboard door.

Wine and glasses in hand I follow her outside. We go down a shady path to a large swimming pool full of the bluest water I've ever seen.

Grab a chair, she says, indicating a pair of cushioned lounging chairs.

You look great, I offer.

Feeling better, she answers, not altogether convincingly. Cancer's still there. Lungs now. I never smoked a lot but...

I stare towards the blue pool.

What the hell! To us, she says, raising her glass.

To us, I repeat. We clink glasses and sip.

I put down my glass. Around the pool are expensive plants in expensive pots. Beyond a high stone wall almost completely enclosing the pool I can see what looks like a dense rainforest. It's another world, one I could never feel comfortable in, let alone afford. I wonder where George got (gets?) his money. I think of my apartment in town and I think of my parent's house in working-class Woolloowin...

You're quiet Will.

It's very impressive, I say, indicating the surrounds.

Oh, it's George's pride and joy, this pool. And the garden. And the house. The whole place really. It's his country estate.

Thinks he's some kind of lord, she says with a laugh.

She is surprisingly animated, like the Mary of old. I tell her she looks good, which is true (I can't believe how much better she looks than she did the last time I saw her).

You already said that Will.

She laughs a horsy laugh. It starts off like the sexy laugh of old, but then she coughs and, for a moment is in a bit of distress. She recovers.

Sorry, she says. Not nice, is it?

I used to find her laugh sexy.

We sit chatting about nothing in particular. It's all very pleasant, despite a nagging feeling that I shouldn't be here. It's George's place (I half expect this George character, who I've never seen, to appear poolside; bathers on, towel draped over his shoulder, good old boy smile and hand extended for me to shake) and she's his wife. I wonder vaguely what George looks like. And what should it matter if he did appear? It'd just be three old people by a pool! Crazy. No, what's really troubling me is a feeling of artificiality. In these surroundings my story of the boy seems no more than a trivial self-indulgence. This property, with its pool and garden and designer house, and its chicken-shitless acres... it just isn't real.

Penny for your thoughts Will!

I tell her Billy Drahaam dropped in. Oh, and Gary Lee.

Odd friendship, she says, you and Bill. Often wondered... Are you gay Will? you two?

I laugh, at the same time I wonder how many people thought (think) that of us.

Bill's got grandkids, I say.

Doesn't mean anything, she says. I should know. All that flying! Male stewards... Gary too... he wasn't exactly macho type, was he?

This gay thing! Is there something there? Sure, I was attracted to certain kids, and to certain actors like Montgomery Clift and Kirk Bogard but I didn't know that they were gay at the time. The only experiences I ever had of any sort of 'approach' from gays were real turn-offs. Like Jonny G. who bailed me up in the toilet at Melrose Park that time and suggested we 'do' certain things. We were maybe twelve! I'd always found him repulsive. And fat! There was Clive at the surf club who I defended once from some severe teasing by other members of the club and who later invited me to dine with him and the club president, a creepy older bloke who drove a

sports car and wore a cravat. I was too naive at the time to understand what the dinner was all about.

I don't think you're gay, she says, interrupting my increasingly troubling reflections. In fact I know you're not, don't I!

She laughs.

I pretend hurt. In fact the wine is splendid and I'm relaxed, enjoying the company.

I was thinking about your story, she says suddenly. You know, that bit about the boy going into the fire. And the woman with the stick. It seemed an odd thing. Did you make that up? When you were reading I was reminded that I'd had dreams like that; not exactly the same, but vaguely similar; going into smoke and all that. In fact I had one of those dreams after you left. Can't remember much, except that I was being led away and there was a fog, or smoke...

I don't remember where all that stuff came from Mary, I reply. As I said earlier, I'd read certain books and historical essays... journals of the Royal Society from the late eighteen hundreds. Oh, and a series of papers by a surveyor named Mathews detailing the bora ceremonies of the Kamilaroi people published by the Royal Society. I found out later that his reports were second hand. Then there was...

By the way, Will, she says, interrupting, I know what're doing.

What's that, I ask.

Reading your story to me: it's your way of proofing the bloody thing. I've seen you taking notes as you go. But I don't mind. Glad to be of assistance. You could put me down as your editor.

I laugh, tell her I need one, that's for sure.

Anyway, she says, maybe you should continue. I'm in the mood.

I tell her the manuscript is in the car and...

Go and get it Will. Please.

I find my way to the car, get the bloody thing and return. She's lying back on her recliner, eyes shut.

I'm waiting, she says, her eyes still closed.

Where were we? I ask.

Last thing I remember, she says, was the boy going into some smoke. Oh, yes, and he has a name at last. Jabiru! Pretty name. It's a bird, isn't it? Like the one he saw when he was going with the old man. And the one you pointed out on the way to Cleveland. I'm sorry I missed it.

I'm surprised and pleased that she remembers that bit, tell her that a Jabiru is a kind of stork, and that they sometimes come down from the north.

Go on, she says. Read.

I find the page and begin:

He is Jabiru. He's no longer a gangly pubescent boy but a strong young man with scars of manhood etched across his back and chest. He has survived the bora and all the terrible tests that had followed. He has not gone back to the island as he'd intended when he set out but has joined up with Geebung and Jamboor, two mainland blacks who had journeyed with him through the bora. Geebung and Jamboor are bitter young men who curse the white men for taking their land and decimating their people. The three young men promise each other that they will never give in to the white man or adopt the white men's ways.

After the bora they had roamed the country in high spirits, but the seasons changed and the game became more difficult to find. They grow thin and dispirited, getting food where they can and avoiding soldiers and armed settlers. Life becomes hard. More and more land is taken up by white settlers and fenced off. Half starved, they arrive at a camp of dispossessed people, hoping for food and shelter. In all that crowd of men, women and children there is not one healthy person. Nor are they people from one tribe, or from any particular part of the country; they are the remnants of many tribes, some once sworn enemies gathered together in a deathly misery from which there is no escape.

They stay in this hellhole until Geebung can stand it no longer. This is death, he swears. They go from that place of death, swearing never to be reduced to such a state, venturing north past the last of the outlying farms and fenced runs. They climb

up to the high country of Geebung's people where, among tall araucarias, they roam like the lost remnants of some ancient tribe. Although this is Geebung's spirit country he has not been taught enough of its ways to get from it the bounty he knows it can deliver. Geebung looks up into the high branches of the trees but the great bonyi cones he remembers from childhood are nowhere to be seen. It is the wrong time and the wrong season.

Geebung tells the others how, in the season before he'd left for the bora there had been a great gathering of people in this country and how he had watched as the climbers had scaled the trees and thrown down the great cones and how the people had gathered them and put them into the coals of great fires and how the smell of roasting nuts had filled the land. And he tells of the merriment that followed the bonyi feast and how he'd watched on as people from different parts of the land had told their stories and danced their dances.

Without the guardians of the trees, he says, he will never learn the secrets of the bonyi forest.

They turn away from the bonyi forest and head southwest, following an old track along the escarpment of the coast range. At a place where the track runs close to the edge Jabiru looks out over the coastal flatlands. Out of that vast plain the great volcanic plugs of Tibberawaccum, Beerwah, Coonowrim, Toombudla, Coochin, Micketeboomlgrai rise like sentinels. Beyond he can see the waters of Quandamooka and, way out at the extremity of the bay, the long blue outline of his island home. Since the bora he's often been tempted to return home but something always holds him back; fear perhaps of what he might find on his return. He sometimes dreams of home. In these dreams he is on an island that at first seems like his own island, but as the dreams go on the island changes and he finds himself in a strange land inhabited by frightening people. His mother is always there at the beginning, but she too changes beyond recognition and he finds himself lost among a people he does not know. Standing there, at the edge of the escarpment, his heart goes out to his home across the water. He wants to fly across the land and across the ocean, back to his home on the island. But he can't. Not yet.

They turn west. After several days walk they come to a deep valley between the coastal ranges and the high ramparts of the main range far to the west. There are few white settlers in this country and game is plentiful. They catch a kangaroo and, for the first time in ages, feast on fresh meat. There are possums too, and snakes and lizards. These they catch and cook. They grow in strength. The future looks bright. But it is an illusion. Winter comes and the rains stop. The country dries out. Game becomes scarce and they are forced to head back over the range to the coastal plains, stealing from outlying farms as they go, taking flour and tea and sugar. But this is not enough to sustain them. They are young. They need meat. In desperation they slaughter a sheep. It is their first butchering of white men's stock. The meat is good. A few days later they come upon a lone wandering cow. Jamboor whoops with glee.

Kill it, he shouts.

The cow turns at their approach but does not move. Geebung has a spear of sorts, Jamboor a kind of lance. Neither weapon is well made or sturdy. Jabiru has a long blunt knife he'd picked up from a farm. Close up the cow seems huge and unafraid. It turns slowly towards Jabiru, its eyes not quite blank. For a moment man and beast stand staring at each other. The cow makes a noise, a low cow murmur as if in greeting. Facing prey that has no fear is not how it should be and Jabiru cannot bring himself to the final act.

Kill the thing, Jamboor yells, striking with his lance. But the shaft breaks and the head recoils off the tough hide. Geebung thrusts his weapons into the animal's side. The cow bellows, turns and runs. Jabiru leaps after the beast, plunging his knife into the animal's neck. The cow calls out, and it seemed to Jabiru that it is a call of disappointment rather than anger or hurt. The cow trudges on, but it is mortally wounded. The men follow. After what seems an age the beast stops and turns to the men, thrusts forward its dumb innocent head, offers a pathetic snort, then falls slowly onto its side, its eyes staring, its tongue lolling open. It's a long time dying that cow. Despite its apparent acceptance of its fate there is in the beast a huge will to live. It kicks and struggles on the ground for a long time before finally expiring. Exhausted by their efforts the three men sit beside the dead thing, feeling the heat from its body

slowly drain away, then begin the work of carving the beast. But have not anticipated the difficulty of dealing with so much flesh and the butchering leaves them totally exhausted.

They take what meat they can carry to a place as far from the kill as they can go before the light fades. On the bank of a small creek they make camp and prepare a fire for their meat. It is good. Too good! They eat too much. Jamboor is sick.

Geebung holds his bulging stomach in pain but he's laughing nevertheless.

Good tucker all right, he tells Jabiru, pointing towards Jamboor, whose is doubled-up in pain beside the stream.

Jabiru does not feel too good himself. He goes to a soft bit of ground far from the reeking Jamboor and lies down. But sleep does not come. He twists and turns on the ground, cursing the white man's cow and his own inability to limit himself to the meat. He will not do this thing again, he tells himself as he drifts into an uneasy sleep.

It's morning and Jamboor is in a bad mood, pacing back and forth in front of Jabiru as if spoiling for a fight. Jamboor is a bitter young man and sometimes too ready to take offence. The trials of the bora have toughened Jabiru, left him strong and resolute, but the gentleness he inherited from his island people grates with Jamboor, who, in moments of frustration, often turns on him. Jabiru silently suffers his insults and occasional blows. At such times he wishes he had returned to the island, but each time the moment passes and so he stays with Geebung and Jamboor. But this is different; Jamboor strikes at Jabiru and lands a glancing blow. It stings, but it is Jabiru's pride that is most hurt. Geebung leads Jamboor away and the moment passes.

Time passes. It's winter. The days are warm and sunny, the nights cold. It's many days since the killing of the cow and they are hungry. At the end of another day of no food, with the night's cold coming down on them they make camp in a shallow cave. The small fire they manage to make is of little comfort. In frustration Jamboor swears at Jabiru for no apparent reason and calls him names. Jamboor's rant, as is the case so often, is in his own people's language, which Jabiru finds difficult to understand and so does not respond. But Jamboor keeps going. When he clearly

makes insinuations about Jabiru's mother producing a hopeless weakling Jabiru can take no more. He swings a wild punch that connects. Jamboor lies on the ground holding his bleeding jaw and looking up at Jabiru with a surprised look on his face. Geebung, startled by the sudden change in Jabiru, looks at him for a long moment in disbelief then looks down on his fallen comrade. Jabiru prepares himself for retribution. Geebung and Jamboor are blood brothers. But Jabiru is no longer afraid of either of them and doesn't care anyway. He's had enough. He will fight them both. Then he will go home. But Geebung laughs out loud, walks over to Jamboor and helps him up. Then, still laughing, turns to Jabiru and says, You punch like a white man mate!

The three young men make up. They swear a continuing brotherhood.

They move southwest, across a high plain into open range country where there are few white settlers and game still roams relatively free. While stalking a group of wallabies they are surprised by two warriors who hold them at bay with long spears, all the time jabbering away in a language Jabiru and his friends cannot comprehend. They are tall thin men with long beards and body markings different to any Jabiru has previously seen. The spears they hold are proper tribal spears, not like the ones Jamboor and Geebung carry. Their very bearing speaks to Jabiru of the kind of authority the old man who took him to the bora had carried. The men stand facing each other, unsure what to do. On an impulse Geebung points to a bare patch on the ground and squats by it. With a stick he draws a rough picture of a cow then plunges the stick into the drawing. The strangers laugh and nod their heads vigorously. So begins a comradeship of the dispossessed. It's not long before the five outlaws learn to understand each other, finding a common language that serves them well enough.

They prey on outlying stations run by settlers with little knowledge of the land; white men who, with false hope and little expertise, eke out a rough and often unsustainable subsistence on land less fertile than they'd at first thought in a climate they have little understanding of. Close up, which Jabiru sometimes gets when scouting for a raid, or waiting for the right moment to steal from their sad little vegetable gardens, he can smell their disappointment. He sees the hardness of their

lives, how they are often alone and fighting a losing battle with the seasons and the perversity of nature. He admires their perseverance and the way they battle on against such terrible odds, developing an ambivalent attitude towards the white men; secretly dreaming that one day he might be able to find a place where he too can work the land. But he does not let on these thoughts to his companions lest they think him weak.

News reaches them that a family of white settlers - a mother and two children - have been butchered on a lonely outstation a day's walk from where they are camped. They have been seen. Riders will be out with their horses and their guns and their dogs looking for revenge. Despite being nowhere near the place at the time of the massacre they will be prime targets. Trusting no one they split.

Jabiru wanders alone, always on the lookout for the soldiers or, worse still, angry ticket-of-leave men keen to vent their frustrations on others in return for the bitter cards that life in the colony has dealt them. Unable to find or capture enough food on his own Jabiru enters a black's camp. It is the same as the last one. Old men lie about in sullen stupors round crude flea-infested humpies, women sit in the dirt with bleeding faces breast-feeding whimpering and snotty-nosed children. All about is filth, constant bickering over food and territory and half-hearted fights between people from different parts of who were once sworn enemies. Yet he stays and eats the proffered food and sleeps among the dirt and dogs. He is like them, growing into misery, becoming like the living dead. Jabiru sits in the dirt, sunk into despair. News of the massacre spreads among the people in the camp and they tremble in fear for some have known the wrath of the white men. Some cast suspicious looks at Jabiru but he pays no heed and the people lack the will to pursue the matter. And so he stays.

Soldiers come riding their horses through the camp. Jabiru cringes in fear. He tries to look as old and bent as he can. One of the riders, a young man in civilian clothes, stops by Jabiru and looks down from his mount. For what seems an age the white man stays looking down on the black man. Jabiru looks up and for a moment their eyes meet. And in this instant Jabiru sees that the rider is no older than he is and that he has no stomach for what he is doing. This reluctance is written clear in the

young white man's expression. There is no hate there. The rider jerks the reins and gees his horse. It rears up. Jabiru falls back. The horse turns and the rider is gone.

Time passes. Word reaches the camp that two black men from a northern tribe have been taken and hanged at the windmill in the town. Some in the camp knows these men and say that they were not responsible. There is talk of an uprising against the whites. Some of the younger men mutter words of war but the people are too weak and nothing comes of it and the people in the camp settle back into indolence.

Two white men appear in the camp with a loaded dray. They come right into the camp and, without a word begin unloading blankets, old clothes, odd shoes and bags of flour. The people gather round in sullen silence, accepting the offerings. Then, the dray empty, the white men go away. Jabiru grabs a pair of boots, a torn soldiers coat and a pair of stiff woollen trousers. As he puts them on his disgust with his condition increases. Not all that long ago he had emerged from the bora as a warrior. Now he is reduced to a beggar wearing discarded white men's clothes and eating damper made from white men's flour. The pathways of his people have been ploughed over and the land divided by fences and wild game is increasingly scarce. He fears a time when he will be like the older men at the camp; men broken by their lot, lying in ugly stupors from cheap plonk supplied by the dregs of white society.

Geebung and Jamboor appear, leaner and meaner looking than ever. You can't stay here, Geebung says, you will die. Come with us. You have nothing to lose. Jabiru gathers up his strength and the three men go from that camp of misery. They travel widely throughout the back country, finding game where they can and stealing from the white settlers when they can't. Mostly they can't. Tired and hungry, they travel back towards the coast where come to a small untidy clearing strewn about with fallen trees and untidy piled up undergrowth.

In this clearing two white men are building a fence, the pale skin of their shirtless bodies red raw from the sun. The ground on which the men work is hard. Sweat pores from their skin. Cicadas buzz incessantly as if angry at this assault on their forest. Birds call intermittently. High above the clearing a pair of wedge-tail eagles soar in updrafts of warm air.

The men are Reginald Piper and his son Charles. Charles Piper lifts his crowbar and jams it down. It strikes a rock. Flints fly. He utters a savage oath while shaking his jarred hand.

Reginald Piper puts down his spade, smiles ruefully, turns to his son.

Strike it lucky didja son?

Go to hell, Charles Piper replies.

Reginald Piper shrugs and continues with his work. Not all that long ago he would have clipped his son over the ear for such impudence but these days angry old Reginald has mellowed enough to sometimes let such things slide. Besides, he's keen to see his son make a go of this land he has purchased at some expense.

From the cover of the enclosing bush the three black men watch the white men working.

That man, Geebung whispers, pointing to Charles Piper, is the one who flogged Moolool. Moolool was a friend of mine. From my tribe! He died. It wasn't the wounds that killed him. It was his broken pride. I saw him Jabiru, saw him die a broken man. Those men were at the hanging of the black men who they said killed some settlers. But they weren't the ones who did the killing. I was at the windmill when they were hanged. There was a great mob there. Black and white. All looking on. Silent we were.

Jamboor pauses. He is angry.

That one, he adds, pointing to the younger white man, called out, 'Hang the black bastard'.

Those men, Geebung hisses, must die.

Reginald Piper and his son Charles, unaware of the watching black men, continue working at their fence posts. Reginald Piper places a post in the newly dug hole. Charles raises his sledgehammer and brings it down hard. He misses the post and striking his father a glancing blow to the hand. Reginald Piper offers up a scream of obscenities and, with his good hand, cuffs his son over the head. A Kookaburra peels off a mocking laugh. The three black men, doubled up in silent mirth, beat a quick retreat.

The season turns. The long wet summer has finally ended. The days are cool, clear and crisp. Charles Piper, with the help of his father, has transformed his fifty acres of once difficult scrub into a going concern. There's a residence of sorts, a shed for hay, cattle yards and a good deal of fencing. There are fifty head of good quality beef cattle and two cows for milking. The small hut that serves as the residence is well stocked with food and furniture (mostly from dubious deals done between Reginald Piper and unknown parties).

Charles Piper stands outside the hut surveying his domain. He is strong and fiercely determined. He dreams of expanding his holdings, of building a rural empire over which he will be king; an empire populated by the right people: white people from England. He will build a grand house and bring to it a beautiful wife (between times Charles has erotic fantasies he finds disturbing and has to relieve himself, actions which leaves him feeling remorseful and angry). He will have beautiful children. He will be famous, rich and respected. In pursuit of these dreams he has no time for sentiment, especially concerning what he considers to be the inferior race of people that, even now, after so much dished out to them in the way of harsh example, continue to cause mischief. He carries a growing hatred of the black people.

If they ever interfere with me, he tells anyone who'll listen, they'll be taught a hard lesson.

In this he believes that he is universally supported.

When Bob Down, a burley Englishman with a small holding not far from Piper's run calls a meeting to work out a strategy for dealing with troublesome blacks Charles Piper sees his chance. He arrives at Bob Downs hayshed full of confidence that he will be able to talk the other men into actions that will, once and for all, put a stop to the thieving and disruption caused by the blacks.

He strides red-headed and full of bravado into the shed, brushes past Daniel O'Brien, an Irishman and ex-convict known to have worryingly sympathies towards the blacks, and takes his place near the front of the mob. There are a dozen men in the shed, standing shoulder to shoulder on the rough earth floor before a makeshift stage. The men shift their feet nervously, surreptitiously looking about them for affirmation.

Some of the men are ex-convicts who have been given grants of land. Some are ex-soldiers, likewise given grants of land. Some are recent arrivals seeking their fortune on what they have been told is fertile ground. But, as most have found to their dismay, it is not fertile land. It is, even for the few with any experience of farming, unlike any land they have known. Most know little about farming and are consequently having a rough time of it.

Big Bob Down climbs the hastily made stage, removes his hat to reveal a rounded and almost bald scalp. He coughs nervously. No one pays him any heed. Gentlemen, he shouts over the general hubbub, a bit of order if you will.

The men turn to him and, after some muttering and shuffling, settle down. They stand silently, shifting nervously from foot to foot in their work boots. Bob Down begins to outline the reasons for the meeting but he is unused to public speaking and his delivery is mangled.

Get on with it Bob, someone yells from the floor.

Bob Down clears his throat. All right lads, he says, lets get down to business. Reason we are here is clear. The blacks have been causing trouble. I for one lost two good heffers just this last month. Jonathon Brown up by Toogoolawah way had his house ransacked (the aforementioned person, standing in the second row, offers a guttural grunt of displeasure at the memory). The authorities were no bloody help. They have their orders from England lads. And what would they back home know. All this business about being kind to the blacks... Bloody nonsense! It's doing no good. Something has to be done. And quick. Otherwise we'll all be done for.

Murmurs of approval ripple across the floor.

Bob Down resumes. What do you reckon lads? Anyone got a suggestion?

There is an uneasy silence. Men mutter unintelligibly. Roughshod feet shift uneasily.

Out of the muted murmurs of anger a shrill voice calls out from the front of the mob, The bloody blacks need to be taught a lesson!

The men turn to the speaker. A murmur of approval ripples through the shed.

Charles Piper, face flushed with anger, climbs the stage, stands beside Bob Down and turns to face the mob.

We've got to rid the country of their kind, he adds.

The young lad's right, shouts an older voice.

There are shouts of encouragement. Bob Down looks down over the assembled faces with a worried look. So much, he knows, is at stake. But it has never been his intention to needlessly harm people. Not even black people. His thoughts had run along the lines of organising reserves, even of offering some sort of assistance to them. In truth Bob Down is a large but gentle soul. He has also had experience with some blacks that have been, contrary to popular opinion, quite positive. He feels, deep down, that they, the blacks, have reason to be bitter. But he cannot say this. Right now he's worried things could get out of hand, especially with that hot-headed Piper lad. He fears the consequences of raiding parties, especially ones led by young fools like Piper. But the mood in the shed is ugly and, really, it's out of Bob Down's control.

One by one the men become aware of a different presence on the stage. Daniel O'Brien is up there, standing beside Bob Down and looking over the gathering. The shouts and mutterings cease.

Someone yells, what are you doing here O'Brien?

Hoy! says another, what's that nigger-lover doing up there Bob?

It's a free country now, says Bob Down above the uproar.

The mob goes quiet. Bob Down has a point.

O'Brien, says Bob Down, is making a success of his land. Maybe we oughta hear what he's gotta say.

There are some angry shouts of disapproval until someone yells, Let's hear the man.

Daniel O'Brien clears his throat, offers a warm welcome and a sincere hope that everyone is doing well.

Get on with it!

We know you, Gin lover, another man shouts.

Got a couple of black gins for comfort, yells a third.

O'Brien, a big man who is more than capable of looking after himself, ignores the taunts and, after a brief struggle to overcome his fear of public speaking, tells the crowd that he's had blacks working for him and that he's had no troubles.

All that's needed, he adds, is a bit of give and take.

Gerroutha ere, someone yells from the floor.

There is consternation among the gathered settlers. This is not what they had come to hear. Most have lost stock to marauding blacks and are in no mood for forgiveness or compromise. They are bitter men, some with nasty histories and nowhere to go but where they are. Which is on land they are unfamiliar with. They are strong men mostly, and some carry violent tempers. Some have unleashed on the helpless blacks they have employed the kind of floggings they themselves had endured as convicts. Those among them who had been soldiers carry their own resentments against the authorities that brought them to these shores and awarded them land they could not manage. They are not men to be messed with.

O'Brien is on shaky ground. Like Charles Piper, most of the men in the shed have little time for sentiment, or for seeking the potential good in men, especially the blacks. They murmur threateningly at O'Brien. Charles Piper, standing on the other side of Bob Down, smiles wickedly.

Thinking he has the meeting on side Charles Piper yells out in his oddly high-pitched childlike voice, A pre-emptive strike mates. That's what's needed. Teach the lazy buggers a lesson...

The crowd murmurs assent. Charles Piper's face, red at the best of times, is now aflame, so angry and worked up is he. But he has the day, has them on side.

But wait, who's this walking towards the stage? Charles Piper is sure he knows the man but can't quite place him. Then he remembers; it's that James Bolan who came to dinner at his parent's house all those years ago. They were only boys then and there had been only one meeting. Apart from the odd passing in the street, when a few words were exchanged, they never met again. All this time Charles Piper has carried the conviction that he'd been snubbed. In such a small town that snub

hurt. They had been, after all, among the only free children of their age in the colony. When Charles Piper later learnt that as a child James Bolan preferred the company of the black children and that he played with the black kids out at Yorks Hollow he was furious. Now, here he was, a fellow landholder, probably about to support that liberal ex-convict Daniel O'Brien.

James Bolan mounts the stage, positions himself between Charles Piper and Bob Down and looks about the crowded shed. Confronted by men who seem so much older and harder than him he is, for a moment, speechless. James Bolan is no ex-convict or de-commissioned soldier or poor migrant seeking a better life. His father, a paid official of the crown, was able to purchase good land, a fact many whose choice – or rather allocation – of land had proved less fortunate resented. His mother had started a school and played the piano. They were, at least in comparative terms, privileged. James Bolan wonders what right has he to speak to such a gathering.

Catcalls and boos echo off the rough slab walls of the shed.

Lets hear what the young chap has to say, Bob Down says, his voice carrying a new and, to some in the crowd, intimidating authority.

This is getting interesting, whispers one wag to his neighbour.

The crowd settles. James Bolan draws breath. He tells the men that he and his father have employed black men from time to time and that they've had no trouble with them, apart from a tendency to wander off when it suited them. A bit of good will doesn't go astray, he adds. All you have to do is treat people right.

Charles Piper swears at James Bolan, pushes him aside and turns to the others.

Don't listen to him men. He's a Bolan. Next thing we'll be turning our land over to the blacks. There's a camp not far from here. Flea-infested place. Some young troublesome blacks there. I suggest a raid. Wipe out the trouble-makers...

But the men on the floor are mute. Many of them know and respect James Bolan's father as a tough man who was always prepared to give people a break. There's a long silence. A voice from the back of the crowd suggests that, if nothing else, the blacks could be useful as cheap labour. Another suggests that maybe they'd all lost some perspective.

The room goes quiet.

Past my bedtime mates, one older settler grunts. I'm off.

Bob Down holds up a hand. Meeting's over folks, he says with resigned authority.

Bob Down is outside seeing the last of the men off. Daniel O'Brien, James Bolan and Charles Piper are still on the stage arguing. O'Brien shrugs, mutters something inaudible but clearly dismissive of the fuming Piper, then leaves. James Bolan finds himself, after so long, alone with Charles Piper. There is an uneasy silence, broken by an oath from Piper. James Bolan tries to calm the man he once played with as a child but Charles Piper is having none of this.

You'll regret this Bolan, he growls.

Best be off lads, suggests Bob Down, returned from seeing the last of the men off. Work to do in the morning.

Charles Piper returns to his property angry and frustrated. If he can't get support from the other settlers he'll act alone. He's heard of the practice of lacing flour with arsenic and goes to some trouble to procure a small amount of the stuff. He laces two bins of fine flour with the poison, according to directions given to him by the supplier, and leaves them in the rough wooden store behind his house. That night he goes to bed well pleased with his work.

Charles Piper does not sleep easy. His pent-up anger manifests itself in frightening dreams where he finds himself in situations way beyond his control. He tosses and turns on his hard bed, fighting increasingly horrible nightmares. Dawn breaks. He wakes exhausted and bitterer at the world than ever. He works around the run until the last light of day then goes to his lonely hut to rest and contemplate the coming night.

Half a day's walk to the northwest, deep in a narrow gully between towering cliffs of exposed rock, five men sit shivering round a blazing fire. Cold comes down from the high country. The men are Jabiru, Geebung, Jamboor and two young blacks from the Cooroy area they met two days earlier. They are an odd company to look at, dressed as they are in odd assortments of white men's clothes. One of the Cooroy

blacks wears an old English soldiers coat, faded red, and a tattered pair of soldier's pants. The second Cooroy black sports a worn pair of prisoner's pants and a heavy chain of bones and feathers round his neck. He has no shirt. Neither have shoes. Jabiru is wearing the clothes he got at the destitute's camp, including and an old pair of boots without socks. Geebung has on a dirty white shirt, trousers that are far too short for his long legs, a pair of black shoes without laces and a shiny black coat bare at the elbows. Among this ragged lot Jamboor shines. He is fully fitted out with a white shirt that's almost clean, a good pair of dark pants, shoes with odd socks and a coat of a fine weave that might once have belonged to the governor. These things he wears with a swagger that Jabiru finds amusing.

Geebung pokes at the fire. Sparks fly up. Firelight plays on the high rock wall of the gully, making weird shapes. An owl hoots close by. Jamboor jumps up in fright, turns to face an unseen enemy. Geebung laughs, tells him to sit down. Jamboor swears. He's jittery.

This fire, he hisses, is too bright. They will see us.

Geebung asks who they might be.

White men, Jamboor says with feeling.

Jamboor mumbles into the flames, talking to himself.

What's up Jamboor, asks Geebung.

That man, mumbles Jamboor, he die...

What man, the Cooroy men want to know.

Oh, just a white man, says Geebung.

Jamboor jumps up, utters an oath. Not just a white man, he fumes. Bloody bad white man. He...

Geebung, who at one point was most keen on revenge, explains to the Cooroy blacks the history of the Pipers and their role in Moolool's death.

We all want revenge, he adds.

The Cooroy blacks, whose people have suffered because of the white men, support Jamboor. The white man, they agree, must die.

Jabiru steps into the fray (the temperature in this place has risen considerably) and argues for caution, pointing to the difficulty of escaping the white man's punishment. In this he is supported by Geebung.

We have been seen, Geebung reminds them, not only by whites, but also by some of own people who can't be trusted. We will teach the man a lesson, Geebung promises, but we cannot kill him.

After much argument a decision is made: the two Cooroy men will steal what flower they can find in Piper's house, scatter the bulk of it over the land as a sign of contempt and bring the rest back to the hide for damper. Geebung, Jamboor and Jabiru will kill as many cows as they can find, leave their carcasses in the open to rot and return to the hide with only the choicest cuts. All agree that nothing is to be eaten until everyone has returned to the hide.

In the excitement of preparations for the raid Jabiru feels stirrings he hasn't experienced in ages. He needs a woman! Jamboor is worse, racing and pranced about, dancing and singing in the most sordid manner and it's only by tactful diplomacy that Jabiru is able to avoid his amorous advances. The five men cavort round the fire, whooping and yelling madly, releasing pent up frustrations and sexual urges in the most sordid manner. Only when they have vented their manly frustrations on rocks and bushes do they cease and timidly return to the fire's comforting warmth and, one by one, lie down in the dirt and drift to sleep.

For Jabiru sleep does not come easy. The initial excitement has been replaced by worry. He knows that killing a beast as large as a cow isn't easy. He recalls the last time they'd killed a cow and recalls how, despite the animal's pathetic acceptance of its fate it possessed a huge will to live. Killing and butchering a wallaby or kangaroo was hard enough, but killing and butchering a cow was another matter. He sleeps fitfully, every now and then waking from dreams of cows. In one he is alone in the centre of a great open space. From the far end of the space a shape appears. It is a cow. It comes to him, growing larger as it comes. It is before him. Jabiru stands. The cow stands. The cow opens its mouth. Out of that mouth comes a high-pitched

scream. Charles Piper is screaming for mercy. Jabiru wakes in a cold sweat. It is cold. The fire is out and there's a faint grey light to the east.

A cold light floods the gully. Jabiru gathers wood and relights the fire. Geebung and Jamboor stir. They rise and gathered round the freshly blazing fire. The Cooroy blacks arrive with a freshly caught a possum and a large bustard. These are quickly roasted and eaten. After a quick wash in the small stream that flows through the gully the group sets out through the rough and scrubby land towards Piper's run. They have no guns. They know that Piper does. They must be careful.

For a long time they stand silently within the cover of the bush looking out on Piper's run. This is what they see: a large fenced clearing surrounded by thick bush; two small fenced yards, one with some sheep; a bare patch of ploughed earth; a small slab-sided hut; a substantial barn; a rough wattle and brushwood shed; a two-wheeled trap resting beside the shed, its long arms pointing skywards; a large iron plough half in and half out of the barn. There is no sign of Piper or his dogs. Certain that Charles Piper is away Geebung directs the Cooroy blacks to the shed where he thinks the flour is kept, leaving he, Jamboor and Jabiru to deal with the cattle.

The steers – ugly looking beasts – are bunched up in the compound. They would be difficult. There is no sign of the two dairy cows but Jabiru knows they cannot be far away. After a long search they come upon the cows up against the far boundary fence. The cows turn meekly at the approaching men. One stamps her feet and walks off. The other cow - a pretty Jersey – ignores the men and returns to its foraging. The men stand looking upon the beast, Jamboor and Geebung with their crude spears and Jabiru with his blunt knife. Jamboor thrusts his spear but it bounced off the cow's hide, just as it had the last time he'd attempted such a move. Jamboor swears. The cow, now frightened, turns and crashes through the flimsy fence and trots into some uncleared land beyond the far corner of the property. After considerable effort the three men manage to herd the cow into a narrow gully from which there is no escape. The cow stands looking mournfully at its attackers. There is no fight in it.

They kill the cow, strip the best meat and leave the carcass to rot. It has not been easy. More time has passed than they'd intended. The Cooroy blacks will, by

now, have returned to the hide with the flour and will be waiting anxiously. Jabiru, Geebung and Jamboor approach the hide, calling out the agreed warning call as they go. There is no answer. Again they call. Again they wait. Still there is no answer. Unable to wait further, and with the meat going off, they enter the hide. The hunt for the meat had been fraught enough but this slow slinking towards the camp, not knowing what to expect, is almost unendurable. Every snap of twig under their feet, every call of bird, every sound that comes from the surrounding forest signals danger.

They find the Cooroy men lying by a dead fire, the damper cooked and half-eaten. They are furious. The Cooroy blacks have broken the agreement not to eat the flour until all had returned. They lie there, asleep and apparently gorged. In a mad rage Jabiru and his companions race into the camp intending to kick at the sleeping figures, to wake them and challenge them to a fight. But something is not right. There is something about the attitude of the prone figures that stops them. The three men stand looking down on their companions. They are not sleeping. They are doubled up as if in pain. They stand there looking down on dead men whose faces are twisted in horribly shapes, vomit stiff and hard round their mouths, flour spread across the ground like a terrible omen. It's clear; they got hungry and ate a small portion of the flour.

It is the white mans poison, Geebung says.

Jabiru, Geebung and Jamboor swear revenge. Thus time the white man called Piper will die.

Late one afternoon, with the shadows falling dark across the Piper run, they surprise Charles near his stockyards. Charles Piper pleads for mercy, calling out the names of his mother and father even as they club and club him until he is a bloody mess writhing in the dirt. Jabiru has never killed a man. None of them have. It is a hard thing to kill a man but they are angry and show no mercy. The white man dies like a beast. It is, Jabiru thinks, like the killing of the cow: in the end the same pathetic surrendering to fate. They leave Charles Piper there in the dirt; leave him there for the crows to feast.

I close the manuscript. It's almost dark! Little lights have come on all around the pool. They look pretty. Once again I'm made aware of how far removed I am from the boy in my story.

How horrible, she says.

Things happened, I say.

Still do, she says.

I'm not sure what she means, so let it pass.

She slaps at a mosquito, suggests we go inside.

Hungry, she asks over her shoulder as I follow her inside.

I tell her I am but that she's not to go to any trouble.

No trouble, she says, George cooked a huge curry last night. I can heat the remains with some rice. Serve up a salad. That do you?

I agree it would be good, though I'm just a bit disconcerted finding myself in a domestic situation in a home I'm not part of. She serves the meal (a tiny amount for herself) and we eat in silence. The main course finished, we continue to sit, sipping red wine and munching at a cheese platter. Around the dining room, on ledges and walls, are family pictures: children at various stages of life, old people from a different era and a different country.

George's family, she says. Italian. Wouldn't know it to look at him. Not now.

She points out a picture of George. To me he doesn't so much Italian as suavely continental. I'm jealous.

As far as I can see there are no pictures from her side. In all the years I've known Mary she's never spoken of her family, and I've certainly never sat with her round a family dining table. For us it's always been fleeting moments of intimacy; in our youth it was in cars, later in apartments or hotel rooms. I was always an outsider. I guess she was too, no matter how hard she tried to fit in. Looking round that room, with no pictures of her family, I'm struck by the fact that she still is an outsider, that this isn't really her home. It's George's.

I catch her looking at me.

Well? I ask.

You are attractive Will!

I laugh.

No, really, she adds with emphasis.

I tell her she is too, that she always was beautiful. The fact is that in the dim light of that room, after a few glasses of wine, she's is looking good. I fleetingly reflect on our age, but that passes. I'm alive and, dammit, horny. She knows. She puts out her hand. I touch it. There's electricity there, as of old.

Oh, Will, she says with a sigh, clasping my hand tightly, if only...

After a while she withdraws her hand. It's dark outside, and quiet; the sort of quiet I'm not used to. I get up, go to the window and stare out at the night. She comes and stands beside me.

Do you want to stay the night, she says softly.

I give the invitation some thought. There's the husband, away on business of some sort, and there's the question of where this might lead. Do I want this kind of entanglement? But I shrug. What the hell! I'm too old to care. I look at her. She looks terribly vulnerable. She takes my hand and leads me away.

It's early morning. I'm in the kitchen making coffee. The light is already strong through the window. The outside world is stirring: Kookaburras laughing and magpies warbling. A Butcherbird calls; the most gorgeous of all bird calls. A breeze stirs the trees. The dogs race across the lawn. From somewhere unseen a horse whinnies. I turn at the sound of bare feet on the tiles.

You're up bright and early lover boy, she wheezes.

She's wearing a dressing gown and looks, well, a little worse for wear (as I'm sure I do).

Coffee? I ask.

She says that'd be great.

I carry a tray of coffee, toast and fruit outside to the pool. The morning's still fresh. Birds are still calling. A scrub turkey wanders past. I express surprise.

They're are all over the place, she says. Come in from the forest. Scratch around. George says they're a bloody nuisance. Wreck his garden.

Lizards scurry across the warming pavement around the pool.

That was nice, she says.

Thanks, I say. No trouble.

Not the coffee! I mean last night silly!

Last night, thinkin' 'bout last night....

Very funny, she says.

Travelling Wilburys, I say.

I know, she says. Good times. Before the rot set in!

I drive back into town, thinking about Mary and how much a part of my life she had always been, right from primary school. They were good years, those primary school years. But things changed. Up until then I'd been happy, the way children are in their naive way. I'd done well in the Scholarship exam and expected to go to a good school but I must have got my signals crossed because I ended up at Kedron Park High.

And with these memories I become bitter. It's a long way from Pullen Pullen Creek to town and I've plenty of time to mull over life's disappointments. As for high school... well, there were good reasons for me to expect better than Kedron bloody High, one being my mother's constant blather about what a good school she'd been to and how important it was for me to get a good education. She'd even gone to one of the big private schools to enquire. She held her own 'higher' education against my father who never got past primary school (none of his family did). That didn't stop me thinking that he was the clever one (I think my mother knew this and resented it). She'd sometimes bring up the education thing as a kind of weapon against my father's hurtful sarcasm and quick wit (often directed with devastating effect against my mother's conservative political leanings). At such times I could see that his curtailed education did put him on the defensive. My mother also said, countering his oft-expressed knowledge about world matters and politics, that she read proper book and that he just read about facts.

How could anyone enjoy reading Karl Marx, she'd say.

I don't think my father ever did read Marx, although he would spout knowledge of the Manifesto.

My mother read poetry, which he didn't. He read Hansard, which she didn't. It was all part of the parental dialectic.

This dialectic was something I never came to grips with and I'd always be caught between the relative merits of faction (my father) and fiction (my mother). The upshot was that I'd buy heavy books about world history or politics and never finish them. On the other hand I'd start reading classic novels but never finish them.

Another reason I was disappointed about the school I went to was overhearing my parents say they'd be prepared to make sacrifices in order to send me to a good school. But when the time came family finances weren't up to paying the kind of fees private schools charged. They considered sending me to Brisbane State High, which was my mother's old school, and a good one. But that would have meant going by tram every day, which would have meant more money.

So I found myself at Kedron Park High School, along with a few hundred working class kids from the surrounding suburbs. It was a brand new school catering for what was then a substantial population boom. I was among the first intake. It wasn't all shiny new, and it wasn't welcoming. Buildings weren't finished and some of us had classes under a tumbledown wooden grandstand beside the old dog track, a canvas cloth dividing the two classes that shared that space. There were no grand buildings or manicured playing fields at that school, only hastily built classrooms, empty paddocks and the remains of the dog track on the floodplains of Kedron Brook.

I hated that school right from the start and never got over the disappointment of having to go there. It didn't help that I was small for my age in a school of big working class kids raised on cricket and rugby league. I wasn't interested in sport but I was good at drawing, which in that school was considered odd. That wasn't such a bad thing in some ways. Some of the cheekier girls got to know about my ruder drawings. One asked me to do a drawing on her arm. I drew a naked woman, just like the ones I'd seen in *Man* magazine. She giggled, then smacked me playfully and the

other girls who'd gathered round laughed and I was asked to do more but I didn't. Not then.

There was obviously a down side to all this. One of the kids in my class called me a poof because I didn't play rugby and because I did art and was too friendly with the girls. He was a pathetic dumb hanger-on, always trying to ingratiate himself with a bunch of thick kids who thought they were tough. He thought he was safe with them around to back him up. I tried to ignore him at first but he followed me, calling names. His mates were there too, but they hung back a bit. I think that deep down they detested him as much as I did. He kept at it, calling me names. Eventually I turned and said, Piss off jerk! That stopped him for a bit. Surprised me too! He looked round to his mates but they just laughed. Then he asked me to repeat what I said. I did and he swung a punch. It missed. Without thinking I hit him low in the stomach. He doubled up and I punched him hard on the nose and he went down flat on the ground and didn't get up. I was more surprised than anyone and half expected retribution from his tough mates but they just laughed and walked away, leaving him there on the ground looking up at me with a stupid look on his face.

I smile to myself at this memory now. There wasn't much to smile about in those years.

Mary, like me, expected to go to a better school. She heard about the fight and must have been impressed because for a while there it was okay for me to be seen in her company. She found out about my drawing on that other girl's arm and one day asked me to do one on hers. At first I wouldn't but Jane, her best friend, urged me on saying, do a rude one Will, and we went down towards the creek and I did a drawing of a naked woman on her upper leg and put a mark where I thought the crack in the vagina would be but she said, don't be stupid Will, it's not like that and turned to Jane and said, is it Jane, and Jane laughed and said, You're just a perv Will.

I promised myself I'd be more careful (and maybe more accurate) in future.

Mary Wright had her own crowd, which was much more worldly than the one I mixed with. It had always been like that, even in the days when we'd walk together

to primary school; as soon as we got to the schoolyard she'd seek out her more worldly girl friends, leaving me with boys she considered childish.

I'm driving along, thinking about sex and growing up. My real sex education began at the Star Theatre at Kalinga (we never called it a cinema). The Star was just a big shed with a fancy mock art deco entrance and huge canvas seats that you sank into and had trouble seeing over even when you were nearly fully grown. Every Saturday they played the same program: a few ads, then a Movietone newsreel, then some Disney comics (Donald Duck, Micky Mouse...), then a cowboy serial (Tom Mix, Hop-along Cassidy, The Lone Ranger...) and, after interval, a full feature, usually a western.

It was in those big floppy canvas seats that we boys got to experiment with usually willing girls while newsreels and comics and serials like The Lone Ranger and Hopp-along Cassidy and Tom Mix flashed across the screen. It was awkward and oddly innocent and never progressed far; at least not for me. The odd thing is that, looking back I feel, more than anything else (and despite the awkwardness of it all), an odd sense of sweet innocence. It was the beginning of awareness. At the primary school dance Bill Haley's Rock Around the Clock had opened a door into another, brighter world. I was ready for - although I'm not sure I understood - the bittersweet romanticism of singers like Buddy Holly. What went on in the Kalinga Picture Theatre was little more than groping. I had no idea! Neither, I think, did most of the girls. It was more daring do than anything. Like the first time I went further than holding a breast. I can't remember who the girl was. All I do remember was kissing briefly before holding her breast and being surprised when she didn't object. Next thing I'm feeling her cunt and it's wet and sticky and she's encouraging me and all of a sudden I'm frightened, maybe even repulsed and the bouncer coming with his torch and I'm disengaging, staring all innocent up at the screen where some cowboy on a horse he galloping along to the sound of Wagner's Gotterdammerung or whatever.

That was what we did in those big lazy canvas seats.

And I recall the one time I sat next to Mary Wright and she let me do things to her that she though amusing but which for me were incredibly daring and she did

things to me like reaching into my pants and holding my cock in her hand and whispering do you want me to stroke you Will and before I could answer she was doing it and I was coming and that was the first time I had come not masturbating myself and I didn't know what to do and she laughed at my embarrassment and said, You're funny Will, which made me feel even sillier.

But girls weren't the only attraction at the Kalinga picture theatre. I began to be aware of fashion. Clothes weren't something I'd ever really thought much about, apart from whether they were comfortable or not. Hair was the same. You just had it cut. Sometimes my father cut it, other times I'd be given a few bob to go to the barber at the end of the street. It wasn't a real barber's shop; just a room built in under-the-house on a plain suburban street. That so-called barber only knew 'short back and sides' with a part down one side, but at fifteen I was becoming more aware of style. It was round that time I saw my first bodgie. I was at the Kalinga pictures one Saturday afternoon when a kid walked in I'd never seen before. He was maybe a year older than me. I think he was English and new to the suburb. He walked down the centre aisle like something out of Blackboard Jungle. He had black hair swept back to a duck's tail, a red sports coat with black lapels, tight black pants, desert boots and a black skinny tie. I thought he was fabulous. The sight of him changed my life. Soon after that I got my first long pants. They were black with a green fleck and I had them pegged to thirteen inches. My father wasn't impressed. That act - buying a pair of flecked pants and having them pegged like the stovepipes proper bodgies wore - was my maybe first real act of rebellion.

I began to see less of Mary Wright at school. She seemed distant. I didn't care. One day, after she'd abused me for nothing I'd done, I asked her friend Sheila why she was so testy.

Oh, Sheila said dismissively, it's the curse.

I knew what she meant because I'd sometimes see my mothers underwear in the concrete laundry tub under-the-house, floating in blood-red water. Sometimes, it seemed, girls were a different species.

I saw even less of Mary Wright after that. By third year I'd grown and gained a bit of self-confidence. Which was strange because the reverse was happening to her. She stopped growing, schoolwork became more difficult and she couldn't bluff her way through the way she used to. She failed a couple of exams and began to be seen as a bit lazy, maybe even shallow. Mary Wright left high school early and got a job in an apartment store in town. I saw her there once, all dolled up and looking much older. I stood by the escalators looking over at her chatting with one of the other dolled-up shop girls. I'd always seen her as tall but seeing her there with older women I realised that she wasn't so tall, just slim and pretty. In a nearby mirror I saw my own reflection. What a contrast! I was still a kid in school uniform, albeit a bit taller than I used to be. She was a grown-up woman. I hoped she wouldn't see me. I remember thinking that there was something sad about seeing her there, waiting on customers like some sort of servant.

Maybe it was seeing Mary Wright in that apartment store that persuaded me to finish high school. I got reasonable grades and went to engineering college down at the end of George Street, which meant spending a lot of time in town. I loved the city. Maybe it wasn't much of a city but I felt it would be one day. In the morning rush hour I'd find myself among hordes of people streaming out of Central Station and walking quickly to their various workplaces. In Queen and Adelaide Streets trams would be banked up in long lines offloading more office workers. In the afternoon rush hour they'd all steam back for the return journey home. It seemed a proper city then. Even after night classes, when the city was almost empty, there were sights and sounds and smells that only a city could offer: like the reflected lights along the river and the sound of ambulance sirens fading in the distance and the smell of coal smoke out of Central Station.

I stop at an intersection, wait for the lights to change. I'm on Moggil Road, still a good way out. A car pulls up alongside, surf boards on the roof racks, two young men inside, peroxide hair; a reminder of the sixties, when I too had sun-bleached hair and not a care. If the Star Theatre at Kalinga had been the place of sexual initiation never fully fulfilled, Point Lookout was the place of consummation. I

was seventeen when I first started going to the island. Every Friday night throughout summer I'd leave from North Quay, shuddering down the river and across the bay in the *MV Miramar*, disembarking at Dunwich for the bone-shaking bus ride across the island past Myora where, five years earlier, Duncan and Midge had taken me to the midden, and on to The Point. By the time I got there all I wanted was to bunk down for the night so that I'd be ready for the surf next morning.

I'd joined the Point Lookout Surf Lifesaving Club, which became a kind of home away from home. The club was good for me. Between surfing, rowing the surfboat, swimming and all the other silly things lifesavers did back then, I filled out, became fit and horny. I could drink and carouse with the others until the early hours and still be up before the sun had fully risen to paddle out on my nine foot six inch Bennett board, going out beyond the thrashing white water to still water that nevertheless breathed like some great monster, and there I'd wait for that special wave to come clear and mighty out of the Pacific. Frightening they were, those great swells building to perfect shapes curving and curving close to the rocks of the headland. But we were fearless. I'd stay out until the wind shifted and the sea chopped up and, exhausted by the long mornings surfing, catch the last wave in, walking across the wind-whipped sand heading for the clubhouse to shower and change before going out along the dirt road that wound along the cliff edge above the salt spray over Fisherman's Rocks; me and Vonny and Phil and Jacko and Ziggy and Mal, stepping out in arrogant youth, going along the edge of the land high above the white-horse sea past wood and fibro shacks hidden among windswept trees, careening on towards the pubwiththebestviewintheworld; a bunch of young men with sand in our hair; young men who, some earlier time, might have gone off fully kitted to some far away war; free of care, peroxidized hair still wet from the sea, eyes still clear and open to the anticipation of life, skipping along on an afternoon of wind.

Heading into the front bar to drink with the local fishermen with their weather beaten faces and beanies on their heads and torn jumpers with elbows gone talking of giant Trevally and dark island men with Noonuccal blood and workers from the mineral sand dredges along the Eighteen Mile Swamp and dropouts and no-hopers

mumbling in their beers. Flotsam and jetsam! Old warrior sailors and returned servicemen hunched over their beers and not a woman to be seen. All drifting into an oblivion that would close out the light of an outside world they couldn't handle. We would stay there until the talk, maudlin to begin with, grew insufferably boring and then head for the Lounge Bar to mix with students from the Uni and workers from the banks and nurses from the Mater and Royal Brisbane hospitals and college kids from George Street and artists from Petrie Terrace, leaving the fishermen and the old island men with better days behind them in the front bar sinking into beer sodden oblivion.

Those days I had little time for introspection. I pushed away thoughts that, left to fester, might have caused me pain. In the pub I was happy to yarn and sing and drink and flirt and argue until the hotel generator closed down for the night and everything went dark and I'd totter along the dark road with the others, heading back to the clubhouse wishing I hadn't stuffed up with that gorgeous nurse from the Mater Hospital.

I wasn't always unlucky.

Late one night, after the pub had closed and the generator had shut down and it was so quiet all you could hear was the pounding waves far below, I found myself walking arm in arm with a girl as pretty and as innocent as I made believe, going through the pitch black night down to the beach to lie on the sand beneath the overhanging trees with just a blanket to protect us against the wind off the ocean just there pounding endlessly, moonlight filtered through she-oak leaves forming patterns of uncertainty on the sand only we didn't care because we were somewhere else where no one could touch us and all my juvenile expectations and desires came as if from a dream where everything flowed freely and there was no anxiety; one night together under a clear almost equatorial night sky fanned by breezes blowing through a sweetness of leaves and the heaving and sighing of the ocean as vast as the night; one night when there was no need for talking, just lying there perfectly still sensing the soft sweet air on naked skin and the touch, so rare until then, of a smaller and softer hand in mine, two people on a beach and all the time in the world, two young people caught in the spell of the seanight, staring, both of us, through black

silhouetted leaves to a silver moon, listening, both of us, to the coming and going of the ocean, feeling her small fingers curling and curling round my rising hardness and my heart beating with each pounding wave and my own hand lying gently over the magical curving rise between her feeling the awful power of the oceans pull and suck and the sea just there, hissing over the gently rising shore, the surging power of the waves further out, rolling in over and over and we were in harmony with the undertow that pulled and sucked back from the body of the land and the ever coming sea growing stronger and stronger, covering the land with its power and warm liquid thrust, rising and rising in a unity of land and ocean, oh yes, oh yes we were, coming together with the night and the great waves out there piling up against the land one by one peaking to the point where they'd curl and fall and slide in a majesty of foam all the way to the beach which sighed with the weight of the night, sliding back under and beneath the turmoil into the quieter deeper places.

I was in the water early next morning, leaving her back there in the weekender she was sharing with friends from college, all of them sleeping in, the sun just rising and the sea smooth as glass, waves forming pure and strong round the Point, curling slowly into perfect corners held up by the barely perceptible off-shore breeze, just me and the wave in perfect harmony, the water rising and rising to a huge wall, wondering if it will ever break, caught in the crystal water for that one long moment, me and the wave and the seaspray and suddenly I'm shooting out of the water into mid air and there's bright sky and I'm falling into the foam, fighting white water all the way to the shallows, rising up out of the churning water looking for my board, finding it, laughing out loud and striking out once again through the foam and the smaller choppy waves until I'm out the back waiting for the next wave, staying til the on-shore wind came and the sea chopped up all ill tempered and grey and there was no point in staying and walking along the beach with my board, head bent against the stinging wind-blown sand, heading for clubhouse and lunch and if I was unlucky an afternoon patrolling the flags.

All too soon the weekend would be over and it'd be time to catch the old boneshaker of a bus back to the lee side of the island where the *Mirrimar* would be

waiting to take us back across the bay on a Sunday afternoon of gathering clouds, leaving behind memories of a girl and a boy huddled together against the wind on a deserted nighttime beach, a young man caught for an endless instant in the curl of a forever breaking wave and, yes, a young man standing gazing out over the cliffs to the heaving Pacific, moonlight glowing on waves coming row after row on a breathless night of afterstorm, the waves coming one after the other curling, curling and curling, spray flying off the tops to drift on currents of air, silver spray and white water all the way to the dark beach way down there at the base of the cliff.

The trip home wasn't always romantic. Like that time after a big blow, the Mirrimar heading out from Amity across the bar, the weather really bad and the old tub rolling and shuddering through the broken waves, the stiff southeaster sending seawater crashing and slapping against the tossing boat, its ancient boards heaving and creaking, shuddering through the breach until the passengers faces, bloated from the weekend's excesses, turned pale grey with dread and everyone was fighting a losing battle to contain stomachs full of bad food and grog until it was all too much and there was a communal heaving and chucking that spread to the whole boat and vomit was running across the floor of the upper deck and down the rattling windows and you were sitting tight lipped on that ship of fools, shuddering through the gathering gloom, the closed windows alternatively etched by vomit and cleaned by the next splash of salt spray, going on and on it seemed forever until, at last, you reached the smooth waters of the river's mouth and the end of suffering.

Such was life. Right now I'm heading under the Western Freeway towards Indooroopilly, driving on auto-pilot, only vaguely aware of my surroundings, of traffic lights and the steadily increasing traffic. I'm in one of those moods where I can't stop thinking about the past. I find myself reflecting on the main character of my story and how different his life was to mine. His was full of hardship and violence. There was no real hardship in my life and the only violence was the violence of youth; of drunken fights at places like the Railway Institute. That was one tough dance hall. Anglo Bodgies and Widgies from Wynnum, Italian and Greek sharpies from West End, black guys from Inala... gathered outside the dance looking

for trouble while inside innocents like me (ha, ha) kept our eyes out for suitable dancing partners and the band played on. One night Col Joy and the Joy Boys were playing when a fight broke out in the middle of the floor. We were stunned when Col Joy leapt from the stage in the middle of a song to break it up. The fight simply went outside and round the back where once, looking to take a piss, I had stumbled across a line of blokes waited their turn to be sucked off by some half-witted girl and I turned away in disgust, only to be confronted by a big fat cop who pulled me aside and told me that I was too nice a young man to be hanging around such a dive and for some reason I was as angry at his assumption about me as I was with what I'd just witnessed.

I stuck to Cloudland mainly, which was less dangerous, brightly lit and welcoming. It had the biggest dance floor in the country and a fenicular railway that carried people up the steep slope from the tram stop on Breakfast Creek Road. Cloudland was the place to be. One night Mary Wright was there with a bunch of her sharp-tongued friends. I hadn't seen her for a long time and at first didn't recognise her. She was beautiful! To my surprise she came over to me and asked me to dance. I was elated! We twisted and turned and moved freely with the music. Mary Wright said I was a good jiver and stuck with me for dance after dance although she could have had anyone. Round and round that huge hall we went, spinning not quite out of control. Jonny OKeeefe belting out

I'm a wild one, I'm a wild one

Gonna break loose

Gonna keep a shakin baby, keep a shakin baby

I'm a real wild child.

The night passed quickly. The band played *Save the Last Dance For Me* and we waltzed close and slow in each other's arms. Later, taking her home in my father's Austin, she put her hand on my leg. I felt a shiver up my thigh and an awkward hardening. She leant over and murmured something rude in my ear. I nearly crashed the car.

Lets go somewhere, she said.

I drove into Kalinga Park and stopped under the trees beside Kedron Brook. It was dark and cold out. She sat close beside me.

I like you, she said.

I like you too, I said.

We sat for a while saying nothing. Wind whipped the trees but we were warm in the car. Cosy. I kissed her. It was nice. And then she kissed me. I'd never been kissed like that! It went from there. We fucked. It was wild and awkward. It wasn't right. I knew that but she said it was nice. She was generous that way.

We were in love. I took her home and introduced her to my mother. Be careful, my mother said after she'd gone, Look what happened to Gloria Green. Gloria Green lived in Bertha Street and was sixteen when she got pregnant and had to have her baby adopted out. That admonition was the closest I ever came to getting worldly advice from either of my parents. It was also the last time I took a girl home.

We started going out. I was infatuated. She was cool.

Stupid, I told myself.

We stuck it out for a while, Mary Wright and me. But she wanted things I couldn't provide. I wasn't even sure what they were. In any case, behind her extrovert manner and outrageous behaviour resided a political and social conservatism I found difficult to take. I was sure she voted Liberal, if at all. She wanted a full life, she said, one that I, with my stuffy ways, could not provide. I told Billy Drahaam once that she was like the city: great topography but all over the place. Once she called me arty-farty, which was a put-down I took as a compliment. I was into alternative movies. The only movies she liked were cheap action movies. I liked art galleries. She liked the races. I didn't mind the horses but hated the betting culture. She called me a prude. We drifted apart.

Things were changing. The rockers from Wynnum and Inala and other seamy parts of the city who used to gather in their old Fords and Chevs outside the burger joint up on Petrie Terrace had all but disappeared. Rock n Roll George's brown FJ Holden, with its foxtail tied to the arial, was seldom seen in Queen Street (he was tough they said, but it turned out the FJ was his mother's car and when I met him

years later in Queen Street I realised that he was just another wog boy with sharp dress sense and nowhere near as tough as the black guys or the other toughs from Inala who picked fights at the Railway Institute). Bodgies and Widgies gave way to sharpies and surfies. The music changed. At the O'Connor Boathouse we played *Love, love me do*. It felt good that new music; made people want to dance. Everyone loved the Beatles but a different song kept going round and round in my head.

...And it's hard

And it's hard

It's hard

It's a hard rain's gonna faaallllll..

Time passed quickly. I was twenty-two, with a pair of pointy-toed shoes and a surf club jacket with a double stripe on one sleeve that I thought was very sharp! That's what I was wearing that night at the O'Connor Boathouse when I went out on to the veranda for a break and bumped into Mary Wright.

Terrific shoes, she said. Nice jacket too.

I didn't know whether she was having a dig or not.

Inside the disc jockey was playing Beatles songs.

Out on the dark veranda we leant against the wooden railing with the black river far below. All along the river the lights along Coronation Drive reflected off the dark water. It was romantic. I told her she was pretty. She kissed me. Passionate. Like the way she used to. Right there, with people around.

We started going out again. It was even more passionate than before but it didn't last because one day Mary Wright told me that she was absolutely full-on in love. He was a law student from a wealthy Ascot family.

Oh, its all over now, baby blue.

I was devastated. But Billy Drahaam said she and I would never have worked out. He said we were incompatible. More to the point, he added, I was different. That was something I began to appreciate more and more. I remembered the time she and I were walking through Kalinga Park and I'd pointed out a remnant patch of rainforest

along the far side of Kedron Brook and began to describe it to her. She looked at me and said, You're odd Will.

She made me feel stupid that way. Like I did that other time, all those years ago on the way home from school when she said she'd give me a penny if I showed her my 'thing' and I did and she laughed and said she didn't have a penny.

It was the same with Billy Drahaam. One time, after we'd been doing laps at the Centenary Pool and were walking to the car park I pointed over the broad expanse of Victoria Park and said, this place was once called Yorks Hollow.

So, he said dismissively.

Well, I continued, realising he wasn't really interested but committed to my story anyway, this whole area... all the way from Kelvin Grove Road to the Ekka grounds was a ceremonial ground of the old people. The colonists called it York's Hollow after an old chief of the local tribe they'd named the Duke of York. Before that, before the Europeans came, it was called Wallan. There'd be dancing and ritual fights and all sorts of sports played there...

He looked at me blankly.

Interesting, isn't it, I continued, that the whole place is still a sort of ceremonial and sporting ground. You know; the Ekka on one side and sports fields on the other! Instead of corrobories and tribal fights we have hockey fields and sideshow alley.

Billy Drahaam shrugged, said, Who gives a shit Will.

Sometimes I made people uncomfortable. I wasn't like Mary Wright who lived for the moment, or Billy Drahaam who was practical and made simple plans. I began to see myself through their eyes as an increasingly remote person who didn't fit. It got to the point where I began to play up what some called my vagueness as a defence against street-wise people like Mary Wright. Except that she didn't really give a shit what I thought.

After graduating I got a job in the public service drafting reports and shifting paper in a high-ceilinged office on the first floor of the old Treasury Building at North Quay. I liked that part of town. Lunchtimes I'd take long walks through the

city. There was so much to see. There was Queen's Park with its absurd statue of Queen Mary. There was the Library building with its huge and colourful Aboriginal-themed mosaic. Further down William Street were the old Commissariat Stores built in 1829 and an even older wall built from stone quarried from the Kangaroo Point Cliffs. They were, apart from the Windmill up on Gregory Terrace, the only remains of the penal colony of Moreton Bay. Places like that gave the city texture. Like the old Victoria Bridge with its grey steel arches that rattled as the trams crossed to the south side and the ancient North Quay bus shelter and the stone steps leading down to the river. There was no one I could talk to about these things, just as there'd been no one to talk to about my childhood wanderings on my bike through the city's suburban backblocks.

I left home and shared a house with a couple of arts graduates out at Indooroopilly. Weekdays I'd catch the train to work. Summer weekends I went surfed The Point. Winter I played rugby with the University D team. I went less often to the dances. My life had changed and I guess I'd changed. I still saw Billy Drahaam occasionally and, less often, Gary Lee. I also saw Colin Clark from time to time, mostly during the winter months in the Royal Hotel. By this stage Bill owned two taxicabs and was intent on owning more. He'd become one of the boys, had even joined the Lions (or was it Apex - I always got them mixed up). His size didn't seem so outrageous anymore, partly because he'd developed a stoop. He was still my mate and impossible not to like, but I didn't like the way he tried to be just like all the rest. That annoyed me because it wasn't him and it made him look stupid. But didn't we all try to fit in?

Gary Lee was a lawyer and left wing. He was the first person I knew to get involved in the peace movement of the early sixties. He talked me into joining him on the Aldermaston Peace March from Ipswich to Brisbane. That was in April 1964. I remember it clearly because my father was there. I was surprised to see him. He was with another man and they were carrying a banner which read:

Life's good Let's Live
Boilermakers Condemn
....Bombmakers

They looked odd in their shorts and long socks and hats. As far as I could see those two men made up the total Boilermakers contingent. That was my father's strength; he'd do these things and get others to join in, even if that was just one person.

Behind the boilermakers was a bevy of women carrying a big banner that simply read:

Ban the bomb

Colin Clark was the surprise. At primary school he'd hang around like a bad smell and didn't quite fit in with any group. Even at high school he was like that. But something changed in him. He still had the tendency to ingratiate himself into whatever company he found himself in – a characteristic that probably helped his career as a real estate agent – but he was fun to be with and liberal in his views; the kind of hail-fellow-well-met person you couldn't help but like. Gary Lee said he was a right wing fascist at heart, but he was a humanist and I began to like him.

The thing was, none of us fitted the stereotypical Brisbane male model of the times, however much some of us tried. I'd stopped playing rugby after a couple of seasons and none of my friends played any serious sport. I was in a surf lifesaving club, but that was just an escape and I never took the competitive part seriously. I didn't stand with my legs apart lifting beer glasses up to my face like the rest of them. Well, maybe I did at times, but I was aware of it. I liked art, which was considered dubious. Gary was a radical lefty and a bit of an intellectual, which, given his Asian background, sometimes got him into trouble. Billy Drahaam wouldn't hurt a flea

despite his size, which was pathetic. Colin Clark... well he was Colin Clark and tried too hard to fit in.

Not that I was totally divorced from the local culture. I enjoyed a beer at the Regatta or the Breakfast Creek Hotel. I still went to Cloudland and the old South Brisbane Town Hall, which was 60/40 and had a different crowd from the rock joints like the Railway Institute. I joined the Labor Party, which pleased my father and upset my mother. The Brisbane City Council was Labor (which pleased my father) but the state was run by the Country Party, an ultra conservative agrarian socialist outfit that had an uneasy alliance with the so-called Liberal Party.

I was twenty-four and randy. I'd long lost contact with Mary Wright and had a string of 'affairs', mostly short-lived and generally awkward. One by one the people I knew began to drift away. Billy Drahaam was married with a mortgage on some acreage half way to the Gold Coast. Gary Lee became a partner in his law firm and married into a wealthy Anglo family with good connections. He bought a property out Samford way that he called his country estate. Colin Clark was onto his second wife and lived at Aspley. Everyone I knew was either married or engaged. Suddenly I was alone and, well, getting old.

I was the odd one out but I didn't care too much. I just couldn't see the point of marriage, even if I sometimes panicked at the thought of being alone forever. I stopped going to The Point and sold my old Bennett board (long boards were long out of fashion anyway and I couldn't keep up with fourteen year old gremlins whose antics in the surf made me feel old and out of touch). One by one my flatmates either married or left. I found my own accommodation, a neat little apartment in Alice Street near the Botanical Gardens.

I was living in the city but the city wasn't fun any more. I felt disconnected, began to see myself more and more as an outsider. Those childhood bike rides through the suburbs and the Serpentine, and those later walks through the city had instilled in me a kind of love for the place but that love was taking a battering. Brisbane was a hard and masculine word, reflecting a hard and masculine place with a hard history. I saw evidence of that in the streets and on the buses and trains, and in

the shopping centres: the terrible legacy of the past told on the faces of old labourers with bowed legs and faces blotched with broken veins and skin cancers, old farmers and graziers down from the country ending their lives in nursing homes, the beaten strolling gait of the hopeless and forsaken ones who, in their time, had laboured in the sun on roads and bridges and buildings and railway lines throughout the state. I pitied these remnants of a fading world, shuffling among the crowds of younger people who would not have to do battle with a merciless land. In those old people I saw disappointment and bigotry born of suffering. Many of these were people whose ancestors had come in chains from the jails and dingy streets and hopeless villages and crowded tenements of England, Ireland, Scotland and Wales. These, and the later arrivals who'd come at their own free will, had dispossessed an older people and left them with no land and no rights. But the land those invaders took proved tough to control and many failed, leaving only bitterness. I saw that bitterness of the spirit in their faces and I saw adversity in skin they wore like it didn't belong.

I began to hate the place and to think of leaving. But in early 1968 something happened that gave me hope and made me begin to believe that Brisbane might, at last, be shaking off its conservative backwater image. I'd inherited my father's radicalism and had for some time had been looking for signs of life among the dormant Left. There had been some hopeful signs in the previous years: Young Labor at uni and, in early 1964, the Aldermaston Peace march and, in 1966 a sizable protest against the visit of Johnson the American President, which Gary Lee and I attended. No way we were going all the way with LBJ! But by 1967 it seemed that the energy for change had evaporated. Brisbane had a Labor government hell bent on progress and the state was under the control of Frank Nicklin's ultra conservative Country Party.

What kept me from leaving was the FOCO Club. I never did find out what 'foco' stood for, except that it somehow derived from Che Guevara's theory of guerrilla conflict. In the Brisbane of 1968 there was quite a bit of left wing radicalism. To me FOCO was more counter-culture than revolution, but then I was never caught up in movements like the Socialist Alliance or the Communist Party,

both then active in Brisbane. The club met at Trades Hall every Sunday night. I joined early; before it got so popular they had to close the membership books. Suddenly something exciting was happening in our 'great big country town'. FOCO occupied three rooms on the third level of Trades Hall. Room 1 was a live music disco, featuring bands like *Mick Hadley and the Coloured Balls*, *The Living End* and *Max Merritt and the Meteors*. Room 2 was for poetry reading. Jack Thomson and Tom Shapcott and Graham Rowlands read poems or recited other writers, including the two Dylans. Room 3 showed underground films. I saw *The Bicycle Thieves* there.

But it didn't last. The conservatives within the Labor movement got nervous. The *Foco Club* challenged their moralistic bigotries. Some said that Jack Eggerton, the Union boss who controlled Trades Hall, was frightened by the drug-taking. But others said the real reason FOCO collapsed had more to do with internal politics and competing dogmas than drugs or conservative elements within the Labor Party. Whatever the reasons, the one thing Brisbane had going for it, the one thing that was more progressive than anywhere else in the country, closed down.

When FOCO closed the city lost whatever attraction remained for me. Brisbane was the largest local government in the country (and one of the largest in the world) and one that was politicised along party lines. Its Labor government, which could have been a bulwark against the right-wing dictatorship of the conservative state government, could not shake off the conservatism that was so prevalent in that working class town. The Labor Lord Mayor, Clem Jones, who had supported my father in his campaigns for election to Council, was all for progress. Which in his case meant getting rid of what was one of the world's biggest and most efficient tramway systems to make way for private motorcars. The year after FOCO collapsed Clem Jones' city council committed the greatest act of vandalism the city had seen: it ripped up the tramlines. There were protests. People stood pathetically in front of tramcars but the council made the whole thing a done deal by setting fire to the main tram depot. In this great blaze lines of silver tramcars melted and twisted into weird shapes that would, years later, linger in the nightmares of fire fighters and demolition crewmen. People said it was deliberate, that it was a desperate act to stymie debate,

but in one fell deed the country's largest and most modern light rail system disappeared. I cared about the trams. To me they represented something special: a public transport system that was civilised.

I complained to Billy Drahaam.

Best thing that ever happened, he said. Blocked the bloody roads. Took ages to get anywhere. It was about then I decided I had to leave Brisbane.

I'm thinking these things, reliving the past, as I drive through the busy streets into the city and into my street. I park the car, take the lift up to my floor, go in to my apartment, grab a beer from the fridge and wander out onto the balcony. It's near midday and the city is buzzing but I'm home, safe in my den: a seventy year old man with an upcoming colonoscopy appointment.

6

It's early May. There was a chill in the air this morning but now, nearing midday, the weather's perfect. The sky is clear and there's a fresh southerly breeze. All along Southbank people are out taking in the atmosphere: tourists strolling aimlessly, couples sitting on benches looking out over the river, bikeriders and rollerbladers weaving in and out between the crowd. Seurat's *Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte*! Only this isn't Paris; it's Brisbane. And Paris doesn't have this weather! People of all ages are sunbaking along the city beach or frolicking in the clear water of the pools. Mary and me; we are just another old couple out for the day, pleased to be out among the happy crowds. We are looking for a place to eat but there's no hurry and there's plenty of restaurants to choose from and Mary is in good spirits (partly because George is away again, I assume) and so am I.

Ding!

We step aside. A bicycle flashes past, its gaudy lycra-clad rider, middle aged and peddling too fast.

What is it with lycra and old men?

Ding! Ding! More riders on expensive bikes race past.

Ding ding, the tinny bells ring.

Someone will get hurt, Mary says.

Whoosh, whoosh the rubber tyres sing.

Ding ding, the bells ring.

Rumble rumble, the roller boarders tumble.

At the citycat terminal people are queued along the foreshore.

All aboard, all aboard, I shout.

People turn and look.

Don't be silly Will, she says, laughing.

The *Koopa* used to dock there, I say, pointing.

I picture the old steamer tied up at the old wooden wharf, dirty smoke pouring from its two tall funnels, flags fluttering gaily from wires strung from mast to mast, the gangway down and people filing on, me there with my parents and my aunt, all excited at the prospect of a trip across the bay to Redcliffe.

I tell Mary how I went on the *Koopa* once to Redcliffe, that I went swimming and got stung by a bluebottle and someone put metho on the sting because that's what you did then.

She laughs, says she had gone to Redcliffe on the *Koopa* too, and that she had also been stung.

Got something in common then, haven't we Mary.

I guess so, she sighs.

I start to tell her the history of the old ship, how it did the trip from South Brisbane to Redcliffe and back without a break from 1911 until 1953, apart from a brief service with the navy during the war...

There you go again Will, she says, laughing. Another history lesson! You'll never change.

I'm stung. That's the way it always was with us: me telling long stories at inappropriate moments and her just wanting to enjoy the moment. But I can't stop. I ramble on about the south side being the city's first port and how when we were young it was all tin sheds and fishing wharves and all the chaos of a working port and I tell her about the drunken black man I saw when I came to this place with my father, that I was maybe five and that the police had dragged him away and I'd felt sorry for him.

She pulls a face, says she was always frightened of the south side, that it was dangerous.

It wasn't all that bad Mary, I argue. There was a constant movement of people going about their work; fishermen and wharf labourers and deck hands trying to scratch a living. Maybe it was dirty and smelly and unsafe but it was real. Look at this now; it's artificial, all neat and clean and nobody doing anything useful...

You're just an old grump Will, she says. I think it's terrific. Art galleries, theatres, university campuses, Conservatoriums of music, Buddhist temples, rainforests, restaurants, bathing beaches complete with lifeguards.... There was nothing like this in the city when we grew up.

She was right, although there were other things, like a certain grittiness and, well, darkness that gave the place – especially this part of town – its character. In his book about memories of Istanbul Orhan Pamuk describes a melancholy that pervaded his city and its intellectuals. As a child I never thought consciously of my city the way the young Orhan Pamuk thought of his. Brisbane wasn't Istanbul. Not then and not now. Yet I sensed, cycling through those suburban streets of that great big country town we called Brisbane, and, later, venturing onto the south side, that there was something 'other' below the surface of our mostly peaceful suburban world.

When I was a little older I did feel something approaching melancholy (although it could be described as dark depression) when I visited some of the older, grittier parts of the Brisbane of my youth. I did meet people - sometimes in the oddest places, such as on the rugby field or in the classroom at university - who thought the way I assumed intellectuals thought, people who had rather bleak views on the city and its place in the world. I read David Malouf's portraits of the city as it was at a certain time in its history but he left Brisbane just as the place was beginning to change and cast off its dark coating of conservatism. He didn't stick around like Pamuk did. If he had he would have witnessed the changes I did and would, perhaps, have recorded them much more ably than I can.

I think of other, more ancient cities and their histories; their ruins and their culture, and I wonder what Brisbane had to offer in comparison. The oldest buildings, like the Commissariat Stores just across the river from where we are walking, and the windmill on Wickham Terrace, both dating from 1829, were hardly comparable to the ruins of the ancient world. And yet no other city, I think to myself as I walk along that river shore with Mary, boasts within its borders, or within its surrounding districts, ruins as old as bora rings. Are not these earthworks as interesting in their

way as the ruins of Athens or Egypt? Maybe not in their structures, which are of earth, but in the complex rites of passage that were enacted within them. They, and the marked trees and burial grounds (some remaining but most surviving in the pages of history books like J. G. Smith's *Aboriginal Pathways of Southeast Queensland and the Richmond River*, are part of this city's palimpsest.

My mother, in the age before political correctness, used to complain that Aboriginal people contributed nothing in the way of arts or science. How could I, a child, refute her? But why was she so adamant? Did Aboriginal people pose a threat to her? Hardly! I once tried to explain that we were all just people but I was too young and didn't have the skills for such an argument. All I knew - and this might have had something to do with my father's belief in International Socialism, which he passed on to me - was that we were all created equal. Had my mother lived longer she might have seen the contribution Aboriginal people were making to the arts in Brisbane, especially the visual arts and the artists of Proper Now. Most people I knew never tried to delve beneath the surface to see the complexity of the history that was there in both the literature and in the actual physical remains of places like bora grounds. Back then, however, my mother's views reflected the majority opinion, one that was difficult to counter.

I think these things as we walk past the city beach with its swimming lake full of children young and old and its life guards and people sunbaking on the white trucked-in sand, past tourists and their flashing cameras. Why can't I be as proud of my city as people such as Pamuk are of theirs? I look around at the people and I see faces from every corner of the globe; I see Asian people and African people and Middle-eastern people and Polynesians and Melanesians and Indigenous Australians and Northern Europeans and Southern Europeans; all strolling the river walks; people who have made this city home and I recall my visits to Mary in the hospital and how I was struck by the difference between the patients and the staff and I think to myself it's all good, it's all good.

At the southern end of South Bank near the maritime museum we find a restaurant, grab a chair and sit facing the river. I cast a sideways glance at Mary.

She's tired from the walk. I also see that she has lost a lot of weight and am filled with an ineffable sadness.

A waitress comes over. We order seafood with white wine.

Great isn't it, she says, pointing across the wide river.

I agree that it is impressive. From this distance the expressway, partly hidden behind mangroves, resembles a giant animated sculpture across which traffic glides silently. Beyond the expressway the towers of the city rise skyward. Somewhere in among those towers is my apartment block. I'm pleased to be part of all that hustle and bustle. Among the tall newer buildings are remnants from the nineteenth century, including the Commissariat Store that's now partly hidden by the expressway.

I point it out to Mary, tell her it's one of the oldest in the town.

There's writing on the façade, she says. What's it say?

1829, I answer. The date it was built.

I begin to lecture her about how it, along with the windmill on Wickham Terrace, was the oldest building in the city and that it was built by convicts.

Same old Will, she interrupts.

Sorry, I say. It's just that there's so little left.

Sorry, she says, that was rude of me. She reaches out her hand and touches mine. Do tell me...

But the moment has passed. It has always been like this, right from early on; I'd begin explaining something to her only to be cut short or being accused of being a pedant. Which I guess I am!

A waitress comes with our food and drinks, places them before us, relieving the tension.

Mary raises her glass, looks to me. I raise mine.

To us, she says, taking a sip of her wine.

Maybe, I think, watching her sip her wine, she really is on the mend.

We finish our meal (at least I finish mine – hers is hardly touched). The waitress comes over, asks if we need anything else. Mary, whose wine is also hardly touched, says no thanks. The waiter looks at me. I order another wine. It comes

straight away. I sit sipping, not saying much. She starts to say something then stops. She wants to tell me something. It's the second time this has happened. I sense that whatever it is she is trying to tell me is important and wonder what can it be. When I ask her what she was about to say she shrugs and says she's having a great time.

For a long time we sit, disjointed thoughts and images racing around in my brain.

Let's go, she says suddenly.

Where? I ask.

Your place. Be cosy there.

I walked here, I say. It's quite a hike.

That's OK she says. I can manage.

How are you getting home, I ask.

Left my car at Toowong Shopping Centre, she says. Do most of my shopping there. Caught the train in from there. I can get the train back from Central.

We stroll across the Goodwill Bridge, her arm in mine, dodging traffic: bicycles, rollerbladers (including a family of mother, father and three kids) and skateboards. It's one of my favourite places this bridge, day or night offering perspectives on the city that weren't available before. We stop halfway across, lean on the rail above brown tidewater surging far below. People pass by in a constant stream. Many are students from the local universities and music schools, some are tourists, others workers. We stand gazing up river past the Victoria Bridge and the Merivale railway bridge to the blue-green bulk of Mount Coot-Tha and, beyond to the misty blue hills of Brisbane Forest Park; the great breathing lungs of the city.

A citycat ferry speeds beneath us, cutting a wide V wake.

Maybe the Goodwill Bridge isn't the Galata Bridge, and the Brisbane River no Golden Horn, but it's a linking bridge in a way that road bridges aren't; linking, in a pedestrian-friendly way, two sides of Brisbane once considered by many of the city's citizens (including my mother) as different worlds. It is, perhaps more than any other bit of contemporary infrastructure, the one that best symbolises what many call the new Brisbane.

I walk this bridge once a week on my ritual perambulation around the old parts of the city. The route is generally the same: from the Alice Street gate I cut through the Botanical Gardens to the river and take the river path to the mangrove walk by Gardens Point where I stop - low tide or high - and lean on the railing looking down at the ever-changing world of mangroves, cross the Goodwill bridge to South Bank and on past the brutalist structure of QPAC with its great banners advertising the latest opera, play or symphony concert, under the Victoria Bridge and past the Queensland Art Gallery (sometimes taking a detour to check out the latest exhibition) and over the by now not so new Kurilpa bridge to Roma Street and back through the city centre to home.

I've never been on this bridge, she says. Stuck out there in the country it's not always easy to get into town.

Her comments remind me of a report I read once about modern cities that claimed an increasing percentage of people living at the edges of cities never make their way into the centre, spending their lives in airconditioned shopping malls, ears seemingly oblivious to the constant blasts of commercial radio and the tortured whine of female pop singers, eyes adjusted to the visual noise of advertising signs, strolling around like zombies, lonely souls beneath fluorescent tubes for whom such places provide the illusion of company.

All our souls are contained
Within the tube
And when it is broken they fly out
And flutter about.

We walk on through the QUT campus crowded with students. I note that some of the campus buildings along George Street haven't changed since my engineering student days; at least not in outward appearance. The people have though. Back then students were predominantly Anglo-Saxon. This day I'm walking among people from just about every country on earth and it feels good.

That, Mary says, pointing to a burka-clad woman, gives me the shivers.
That, I say, indicating a young Aussie male in shorts and thongs, is a dinosaur.
Ha, ha. Funny old snobby old Will!
Ha, ha. Funny old opinionated Mary!
She laughs, digs me in the ribs, says what the hell.
By the time we get to my place she can hardly walk.
I help her into the lobby, stand close beside her, waiting for the lift.
Funny, I say.
What's funny, she wheezes.
You and me practically embracing!
Not the sort of embrace I used to get from you, she says.
I laugh, tell her those were the days.
Things have changed, I say.
Like what, she says.
Like you listening to my long-winded story.
What's so strange about that?
You never were interested in listening to me before...
Don't be silly Will; it's a story you're telling me, not some lecture. And I'm
looking forward to the next instalment.
How long have you got, I ask.
Plenty of time, she says. George is away for three days.
This is news to me and, well, a bit of a worry. Does she intend to stay?
We go up to my apartment. I put on Miles Davis, prepare some snacks and
pour two glasses of wine, all the time wondering where this is all leading. The music
stops. I ask if she'd like something else.
Why don't you continue with the story Will, she says.
Not bored by it?
If I fall asleep you won't mind, will you?
I get out my manuscript and find the page.
It's long, this bit, I say.

We sit on the couch and she snuggles against me, says she doesn't mind.

I'm your editor remember!

I laugh, ask her if she remembers where we'd got to.

The killing of that white man; what was his name?

Piper, I remind her. Charles Piper.

Nasty bit of work, she says.

I'm encouraged by this little attention to detail.

Go on, she urges.

I take a sip of wine, put down the glass, pick up my manuscript (which is becoming a bit tattered) and begin where I'd left off.

After killing Charles Piper they split. Jabiru wanders alone, troubled by violent memories. Tired and hungry, he enters a black's camp where he lives like a beggar, hoping that the soldiers will see him as just another town black and not come for him like they did for Dumaii who was hanged near the windmill because he had stolen some food. Jabiru had been at the hanging, had stood among his people along the ridge, looking down on the gallows as Ryan the hangman tied the rope around Dumaii's head and pulled the bolt. Dumaii had dropped but his long legs had hit the ground, the rope not quite taut and him not quite dead. The crowd had watched in mute silence as Ryan grabbed Dumaii's legs and pulled on them until he was quiet. He was a long time dying.

Jabiru sits apart from the others in the dreadful camp, looking over a field of destitution. The people are without hope, sitting motionless with their mangy dogs. He expects at any moment to be apprehended by soldiers. Every night there are drunken fights. Every day women are abused, and not just by other blacks venting their pent-up frustrations. Drunken white men come creeping in to have their way with the women, leaving them half-dead and sometimes pregnant. He sees all this but does nothing. He, with his hard firm body and scars of manhood, is reduced to a beggar who, without pride, accepts the white man's outrages in silence. His pride

gone, he accepts the cast-off clothing brought to the camp by white people who cannot bear such unclothed suffering.

One June morning of frosty grass he wakes in a cold sweat and knows that he has to go from this place or die. Time has passed since the killing of Piper, time enough for some other poor devil to have felt the wrath of white justice, time enough for Jabiru to make a move. He goes from this place of no hope with no particular destination in mind. He goes through the busy town and out along the recently widened western road, following the path of the explorer Cunningham who, years earlier, had found a way over the ranges to the undulating plains of the fertile Darling Downs. The road leads on through forested country interspersed with cleared land on which white men work roughly ploughed paddocks. He does not stop but lets the road carry him on. Where he is heading he does not know, nor does he care. He has nothing with him save the old clothes he'd been given at the camp. He has no weapons, nor anything useful for hunting save a blunt knife stuck into an old leather belt. Anyone observing Jabiru would see a tall dark man all skin and bone, curly black hair awry, tattered long-sleeved shirt, torn pants too short for his long legs, boots without socks (stuffed every now and then with fresh grass). He has no hat and nothing to keep him warm.

Late one afternoon he comes to the top of a bare hill from which he looks down on a town at the intersection of two rivers. The waters sparkle in the late afternoon sunlight. On a wooden wharf at the banks of the smaller stream men are loading bales of white powder onto a barge. A little way back from the river bank smoke rises from a large shed, a stale smell wafting up in the smoke.

Solid Andrew Bolan, hands entwined behind his back, legs slightly apart, stands on the wharf with his equally solid offsider Jonathon Butler, likewise at ease but with slightly less air of authority watching the men at work. They are well dressed these two men, unlike the rabble loading the barge.

A fine load of lime Mr Butler, says Mr Bolan, nodding towards the rapidly filling barge.

Tis indeed, Mr Bolan. Tis indeed. Should keep the builders in Brisbane busy for the time being.

Speaking of which, Mr Butler adds, whatever happened to Reginald Piper? Haven't seen him in ages.

Haven't you heard Mr Butler?

Heard what Mr Bolan.

You know that his son Charles was killed by the blacks.

I had heard, Mr Bolan, I had. Word is Charles Piper was a bit of a hothead. Upset the blacks. Some say he had it coming.

Maybe so, Mr Butler, maybe so, but murder is murder.

Fair enough. So what happened to Reginald?

Went back to England Mr Piper. Left soon after the son's funeral. The mother - Jean - was devastated. Went a bit funny in the head.

That is a great pity Mr Bolan.

I wonder if Georgina knows, Andrew Bolan says after a long pause. She would feel guilty.

Whatever for, asks Mr Butler.

We had diner there once. At Piper's place. Never returned the favour. Couldn't bring myself to it. Some say I'm a hard man Mr Butler, but Piper was harder. Hated the blacks. Hated anyone he thought inferior. Truth is he was the inferior one, had a complex...

Steady on there lad, Mr Butler yells, turning to address a young man – a boy hardly more than sixteen – stumbling up the gangway between the wharf and the barge and nearly dropping a bag of lime into the drink.

Sorry, says Mr Butler, turning back to his boss. Young men!

Not a problem Mr Butler. Not a problem.

And what do you think, Mr Butler, asks Andrew Bolan after another pause, about the move to make this town the capital of the colony? Should we separate from New South Wales that is...

Limestone the capital Mr Bolan!

Andrew Bolan looks with dubious intent at the accumulation of hastily constructed building along the shore.

Ipswich, Mr Butler, he replies. They call it Ipswich now. And what is your opinion regarding this place as the capital.

Wishful thinking by the squatting types Mr Bolan. Who have their own reasons for promoting this place! But they are too late I would say. Brisbane has staked its claim and that's that.

Pleased to hear you say it Mr Butler. Pleased to hear you say it indeed. Ipswich is, by my reckoning, too far upstream. The water here is neither wide nor deep enough for the latest ships of trade.

The conversation continues, the two men talking on about the great potential for the district and the rich farming country all about and the endless high downs beyond the ranges to the west, and the seams of coal recently discovered not far from where they stand (of which Andrew Bolan has a fair stake). They continue their discussion as the light fades and the workers drift away, some to their rough quarters, others to the only alehouse in the town to drink away their demons.

Meanwhile, tired, hungry and delirious, Jabiru descends the hill and curls up in long grass no more than one hundred paces from where Andrew Bolan and Jonathon Butler, unaware of the black man's presence, stand discussing the future of the colony. Jabiru hears the men's voices droning on but is too tired to move and falls into a deep and troubled sleep. He dreams that he is running through a world he does not know, running and running through a darkness out of which monsters emerge to taunt him before receding back into the dark. On and on he runs until blackness falls. Out of the blackness a faint light falls on a figure approaching ghostlike through the gloom. It is a birdman. The birdman comes right up to Jabiru and thrusts a stubby finger into his stomach. Jabiru winces and struggles to get away but the birdman has him in a strangling hold. Jabiru struggles against the nightmare. He cries out.

Easy, easy! Easy matey. It's alright friendly voices call. The voices seem far away, part of the continuing dream.

With great effort Jabiru opens his eyes to find two figures holding him in a sitting position.

Easy, easy, a voice repeat, closer now. Easy matey.

Blackness descends. Jabiru wakes to find himself in a comfortable bed in a dark room. There's a window with curtains drawn. Light seeps through cracks in the rough timber walls. A man comes in carrying a glass of water. The man hands the glass to Jabiru who props himself on one elbow, takes a swill and hands back the glass.

You were gone for mate, says the thickset white man, but you'll be right after a bit of rest. By the way, my name's Bolan, Mr Andrew Bolan. And yours?

Jab... Jab...

Jabiru cannot get the word out.

Jacky? Is it Jacky, asks the white man Bolan.

Jacky, whispers Jabiru. My name... is Jacky.

Right, Jacky. I have to go now. Duties in town. But Mrs O'Hara will look after you. Andrew Bolan indicates a solid squat woman who, all this while, has been standing to one side.

The woman called Mrs O'Hara comes closer. You'll be fine in a while Jacky, she says in a soft but firm voice that Jabiru finds reassuring. Rest now.

Then she goes away.

Jabiru recovers thanks to the kindly ministrations of Mrs O'Hara. He's at the kitchen table eating when a man he does not know appears.

Jonathon Butler, the man says, sticking out his hand.

Jabiru takes the proffered hand. It is large and firm. Jonathon Butler is a strong man.

Good to see you up and about, says Mr Butler.

This, Mr Butler says, turning to Mrs O'Hara, hardly seems the same man. You have done well.

He's a strong lad, says Mrs O'Hara.

Strong is he, says Mr Butler. We are short of strong men Mr O'Hara.

Jabiru recovers and, at Mr Butler's insistence, begins working in the limekilns. He works alongside roughhewn white men and a lone black man everyone calls Shorty on account of his great height. It's the first time Jabiru has worked in the pattern of the white man, getting up each morning from his lodgings at the back of Mrs O'Haras tavern, walking to work and knocking off at the same time each day before going home to a good meal. He puts on weight and is good at what he does at the workplace. He is accepted by most of the other men. Over time he learns some of the white mans ways and enough of their language to get by. He is well fed and works hard. He grows in strength.

In the communal bathroom he sees himself in a mirror. The last time he saw himself was as a reflection in the river where he'd camped with the old man. In that was a fleeting image he saw a skinny boy. The image he now sees in the O'Hara bathroom is nothing like that, nor is it like most of the men staying at O'Hara's who, being mostly from convict stock, are ill-formed; what he sees is a muscular figure that, in this light, is not all that much darker than some of the white workers. He stands in front of that mirror for some time. Who, he asked himself, am I. But there is no answer to that question. And he understands, deep down, that there never will be.

On days off Jabiru and Shorty hang around together, sometimes fishing in the river, other times hunting in the hilly country to the west. Mostly they are content to sit by the river, communicating awkwardly in the white man's language that often has them doubled up in tearful mirth. Occasionally Paddy Ryan, an ex-convict from Ireland, and Timothy Sexton, a decommissioned soldier from England, fellow workers from the lime works, join Jabiru and Shorty. On the riverbank one hot summer's day the two white men ask Jabiru and Shorty about the welts across their backs and chests. The black men shrug. It is difficult to explain such things.

Anyhow, says Paddy, pulling off his shirt, look at these.

Across Paddy's back are the scars from the cat-O-nine-tails.

These scars, he says, pointing to Timothy Sexton the ex-soldier, were put there by the likes of him.

T'wernt I, says Timothy Sexton, for I never did wield the Cat.

Doesn't matter, says Paddy. All in the past. We're free men now.

You are the only one Timothy, says Paddy, without the scars.

Oh, says Timothy Sexton, pointing to his head, I have scars alright, only they are not to be seen.

And the others go quiet.

The sun goes down and they trudge back to their lodgings at the back of Mrs O'Hara's tavern.

It is here late one night that the four friends are drinking in merry company when someone in the crowd yells out, Who do you think you are, you black bastards, coming in here all innocent while our women and children are being murdered.

There follows a chorus of angry mutterings.

Murderers is what they are, says another, who kill innocent women and children.

Jabiru feels a punch to the back of his head. He swings around and cops a punch to the chin as he does. Shaken, he backs up against a wall, fearing for his life. How do they know, he asks himself, recalling the killing of Charles Piper and fearing this is to be long overdue retribution. Such is his state of guilt that all his strength leaves him. He has no will to fight. When the next blow comes he falls to the filthy floor. They kick at him until he is a bloody mess but he feels no pain. The world is dark.

He rises to consciousness, finds himself in his old bed with Mrs O'Hara standing there with a look of grave concern on her face.

Got yerself into a scrap lad, she says. From which you were lucky to escape.

Shorty copped it too, adds Mr Butler, appearing through the open door. But he managed to take a few of em out in the process. Anyway, yous is saved from the worst. And the mob's feelin a bit sorry for itself, thanks to your mate.

Shorty appears. His face is bruised but he wears a lopsided smile.

Jabiru asks what happened to Paddy and Timothy.

Oh theys alright, says Mrs O'Hara. Kept out of it they did. Can't say I blame em. And anyway, what could they have done? Anyway, you two rest up. I have to get going. Work to do...

For three days they rest in the care of Mrs O'Hara. Paddy and Timothy drop by with the news that two of the attackers, known trouble-makers, have been sacked by Andrew Bolan and sent back to Brisbane and that it will be fine for Jabiru and Shorty to return to work.

Not me, says Shorty. I've had enough. I'm going home.

That's understandable, says Paddy.

You got a home to go to, says Timothy.

Shorty says he doesn't know but that he's had enough of white men.

Can't blame all white blokes, says Paddy. People is people.

Shorty can't find the words but Jabiru knows what he feels. Despite everything, despite the friendship and care they have received they are black men and will never be fully accepted into this society. The day Shorty is to leave he asks Jabiru if he wants to come along. Jabiru thinks about going home to the island yet, for reasons he does not understand, cannot bring himself to do so just yet.

I'll go with you, he says. Might as well.

They travel west through deep black soil country between Ipswich and the main range. In the flatter country between densely wooded outcrops and precipitous plugs of long-extinct volcanos white settlers have established vegetable gardens and orchards. Once again, Jabiru feels conflicting emotions regarding these white invaders. Despite all the violence he's seen and all that has been done to him and to his people he can't help but admire the neat rows of plants and the way the land is worked. Memories come to him of the abandoned fish traps of his people and how they'd also been laid out in neat arrangements. They were in their way, he thinks, like the fields of the foreigners he now passes. He considers discussing his thoughts about the land and the uses to which the white people are putting it with Shorty but is unsure how the tall man will respond. In any case he lacks the language to articulate such complex feelings. So he keeps his thoughts to himself.

A horse-drawn cart pulls up alongside and the driver, a tall man whose sunburnt face is shadowed by a wide brimmed floppy hat, offers them a ride. They sit on the back of the cart, legs dangling.

Beats walking, Shorty says with a chuckle.

They pass people working on a field beside the road. The driver utters two words in a language Jabiru does not know, but which sound like 'gooden tucker'.

Good tucker white fella, Shorty says with a laugh.

Jabiru, uncertain, laughs along with Shorty's joke.

The cart turns into a side track and stops. The two black men hop down. The driver mumbles words of farewell and the two black men along an increasingly steep and winding road. The escarpment of the main range looms up like a great impenetrable wall before them. Near the base of the escarpment they fall in with two timber getters driving a team of bullocks hauling a large four-wheeled jinker. Jabiru and Shorty help the timber-getters urge the empty wagon up the steep zig-zag track. At first Jabiru recoils from the drivers rough ways as they curse the bullocks along with savage oaths and cracking whips, flicking blood from the bullocks thick hides, but Shorty finds the white men's struggles with the bullocks funny and soon Jabiru is laughing too. Whenever the bullocks turn on their drivers and refuse to budge the two black men break down in fits of laughter and are scolded by the drivers who then take out their frustration on the poor bullock who, being beasts, eventually give up their protests and lumber on.

Near the top they enter dark rainforest. Jabiru has experienced the coastal forests of his island home and the tangled lowland forests of the lowlands but this forest is darker, denser and more forbidding than any he's previously encountered. The trees are so tall he has to crane his neck to see their tops. Birdcalls issue from secret places deep within the blackness of the forest: Whipbird calls, like rifle shots, seem to come from nowhere. Bowerbirds curse from their secret places, Currawongs chime and Cockatoos screech. The forest is alive. Dangling vines and creepers, epiphytes and other strange plants hang from trunks and limbs or nestle in the crooks of branches, adding to the forest's mystery.

Were goin in, one of the white men says, indicating with his thick and stubby thumb a darkly shrouded pathway. You two wanna come? Maybe help with the cuttin! Big trees in there...cedar, turpentine...Maybe pay youse a bit...

The two black men shake their heads. Jabiru remembers the story the old man told him of a tribe who lived deep in the forest long ago, small fearful people who inhabited the dark ravines and who were never seen but who were said to have certain evil powers and who did not like strangers and were only waiting for the right time to come out of hiding to taste the flesh of men.

In his awkward way Jabiru tells the story of the forest people to the white men but they only laugh and call it superstitious nonsense. Shorty, whose country is the open plains of the interior, is clearly frightened by the darkness of the forest. He walks on, calling Jabiru after him. The white men and their bullocks beat a path into the dark heart of the forest where, Jabiru knows, they will find their giant trees. He has seen them at work before: they will cut the trees out, strip them to bare logs and haul the monsters all the way back down the range to the town to be sold for building timber. This, Jabiru understands, is the difference between the white people and his people: their indifference towards nature. The white men have no fear. They will persist. They will get their timber and haul it down to the town no matter what it takes. And when that is done they will come back for more. Until all the good timber has been taken and the rain forest will hold no more secrets and there will be no place for the ancient secret people to hide and all the mystery will be gone.

The two black men continue on through the last of the rain forest. They go through a stand of tall flooded gums into open country interspersed with lines of smaller gums and pockets of wattle. The light here is brighter and sounds more subdued. Breezes whisper through the treetops and branches sigh. They go on until they are in rolling open downs of tall grasses, their waving feathery tops golden in the light. In this gently undulating country the horizon seems a long way off. Distant hills are pale blue. In the sky a pair of wedge-tails glide on currents of air.

The road - by this stage little more than a narrow track carrying the recent imprint of wagon wheels - leads them on. From the tops of low hills the land spreads

out to an unending horizon. The country is vast! Along watercourse and in shallow valleys are stands of eucalyptus. On the rises are pines and in the low places where the soil is poor, stands of wattle. They walk on across the plains under the bright clear light of the interior.

Each evening they build a fire against the biting cold. On this fire they roast what game they have managed to find. One evening, sitting round the fire, Shorty asks Jabiru where he is from. He's never asked the question before and it throws Jabiru into confusion. Since leaving the island Jabiru has travelled widely and, with every passing month, the island seemed further away. For a long while Jabiru sits staring into the fire, unsure how to respond. The Kamilaroi man says nothing. Jabiru wants to tell the man he knows only as Shorty about the death of the white man on the beach and the impact of the white men on his people and how he'd almost given up on entering the world of men when the old man came and took him to the bora but he doesn't tell this story and there is a great silence between them.

There is just the cold wind blowing unimpeded across the earth.

Jabiru wishes he were home.

The two men sit silently around their small fire; tiny figures in this great and seemingly endless plain beneath a cold sky, the fire a tiny speck in the night. Nothing can be said of this.

In the cold morning they rise and continue on, Shorty leading the way, his pace quickening so that Jabiru finds it hard to keep up. They go between low outcrops of wooded hills and enter flat Belar country. The Belar forest is a kind of desert, silent except for the eyrie sound of the wind through the nettles. There are no birds. Deep into the Belar they go. Jabiru is glad that he is with the tall black man called Shorty because in this place there is no direction and all is the same no matter which way he looks. There's just the unending trees with their nettles and their sound that, to Jabiru, is like a muted version of the cry for the dead.

Shorty stops and stands still, his sharp eyes scanning the place as if looking for a sign. Jabiru looks around but in this forest there is no direction, only an unending stand of trees so similar in appearance that there is no telling one from the

other and the sunlight is so dispersed across the nettle-strewn ground that ascertaining direction seems impossible. It is a desert of trees.

Still Shorty stands, concentrating hard, sniffing the air.

Come, he says to Jabiru. They go deeper into the forest until at last the country changes and they find themselves in a scrubby land of low trees and prickly bushes. They go on to a dry creek bed lined with large flowering gums. Parrots chatter noisily from the tops. A cockatoo shrieks. The change in the country is a relief to Jabiru. They cross the dry sandy bed of the creek and enter scrubby country of many tree species. There are more birdcalls now, and there is an intermittent whine of cicadas. They continue on until the country opens up again to a treeless plain where the ground is hard and stony. They climb a rise and find themselves on a plateau of reddish earth covered in small round rocks.

There, on that open plain, is a circle of large stones. They go to the circle and stand gazing upon it. It is similar in size to the one where Jabiru had begun the trials of his initiation, except that this one is made not of earth but of stones. From a gap in the wall of the ring a narrow path, defined by small round stones, leads south. The two men stand beside the ring. Neither speaks. Jabiru's mind is racing. Here is evidence, if he'd not already had enough on that long journey through that other stone country with the old man, that he is part of a nation whose territory extended beyond imagination.

This is where I became a man, says the man called Shorty. And here I was given the name of...

And he utters a name so softly that Jabiru cannot quite hear but thinks it is Baiamai. But it cannot be for Baiamai, according to the old man who took Jabiru to the bora, is the spirit god of all the people.

Bamai, the man previously known as Shorty says a little louder. Kamilaroi man name.

Bamai? Offers Jabiru who is known as Jacky.

And the Kamilaroi man nods and so is known by Jabiru as Bamai.

And Jabiru says his name that he was given at the bora, which is Jabiru, and he says it softly and neither man asks for clarification of the meaning of their names.

They go on across gibber country that is unlike any country Jabiru has experienced. Night falls. It's cold and they are hungry and there is nothing to eat. They gathering odd sticks and tufts of dry grass and, with great difficulty, get a fire going. Beside the fire it is warm and comforting. Jabiru, exhausted, drifts into a deep sleep.

He wakes to find Bamai gone. The fire is out and it's freezing cold, the ground white with frost. Jabiru is alone in a land he does not know. He searches for firewood and, under a bleached log finds a lizard. The lizard is cold and does not move. Jabiru rekindles his fire and cooks the little lizard. This done, and the fire dying, he collects dew drops from small bushes and, his thirst sated, walks away, heading back towards the east, towards the rising sun, hoping he might find his way back home.

He walks through a silence that is immense; the only sound is that of a cold wind over tall grass and an occasional caw of a lone crow. The bora had been difficult and, at times, frightening. So too were the times with the outlaws. But walking through country he has no knowledge of, where he can see further than he'd ever thought possible, is terrifying. It is not so much the strangeness of the land that bothers him, or the thought of white squatters and their guns, but the fear of confronting other black people who, made bitter by their own dispossession, might contest his right to be here. He is alone in country that is foreign, with no certainty of food or water and no weapons to protect him. He has no local language and Bamai, who might have offered protection, has gone. What angry black bands roam these plains seeking retribution for past injustices? How many mad white men are out here seeking revenge for past offences, real or imagined?

Jabiru continues across the high open country of the western downs. All he knows is that he must keep heading east, into the rising and away from the setting of the sun. Days pass. Had he really come this far? He's alone and desperate for the warm coastlands. He's felt cold before but mostly there was company, someone to

help with the fire, someone to share the cold with. He'd felt the cold going through the high country but there heavy trees cover had provided a sort of blanket, so that the nights were bearable. Out on the downs there is nothing between him and the heavens, so that at night the warmth from the earth goes spiralling up, leaving the ground as cold as ice. There were nights camped out along the big river valley with Geebung and Jamboor when heavy frosts would settle but that cold was nothing compared to the cold he feels at night on the open plains. Mornings the grass is brittle and white. He has only light clothing and the fires he does manage to get going are little comfort. The wind howls from the southwest, wind such as he has never experienced. Yet in the middle of the day the sun beats down mercilessly and he has to seek the shade of solitary and almost leafless trees.

He walks on, sometimes through cold winds, sometimes under a terrible sun, seeking shelter where he can. The nights are pitiless and the stars seem to mock his small uselessness. So cold is it that at night he has to gather clumps of grass for shelter, shivering through the early frosty hours.

This morning, after a cold and restless night he wakes to warmer air. The sun is shining and in the east he sees a line of low hills. His spirits rise and he presses on towards the east. By midmorning he is in gently undulating country with a covering of grass. He has found a rough track with the imprint of wagon wheels upon it. To the east he spies a cloud of dust. It's a horse and it's coming fast towards him. Jabiru's first instinct is to hide, but there is nowhere and the horse – now with rider clearly visible – is closing in.

He horse stops beside Jabiru.

Howdy, the rider says with a smile.

Jabiru offers up a cautious greeting in response.

You look lost mate.

Jabiru does not respond.

Not the talkative type, are you, the white man offers.

Jabiru doesn't know how to respond.

Well, says the white man after a long pause, you look like you could do with a feed anyway. Come on. We'll get a billy going.

They come to a gate in a newly made fence of rough cut posts and barbed wire. The man dismounts, opens the gate and they go through.

Not far, the white mans says as they walk side by side. The horse, freed from its rider, ambles off a way then stops and begins to munch at some grass.

By the way, the white man offers, name's Flannigan.

The man called Flannigan sticks out his hand and they shake white man's way.

And your name, asks Flannigan.

Jacky, mumbles Jabiru. They call me Jacky.

Well, come on Jacky, I'm dying for a cuppa. They walk on through the silent country. There's only is that of the sound of the horse, which is now following close behind, and Flannigan's constant babble (which Jabiru can't understand, so rapid is the speech and so thick the brogue). As they go on Jabiru realises that this man called Flannigan is lonely and desperate for company. They come to a rough slab cottage surrounded by an assortment of half-built sheds and stockyards. At the back of the cottage they stop.

Take a seat, mate, says Flannigan, pointing to a weathered wooden crate in the middle of a bare yard, I'll get the billy on. Jabiru sits as ordered and watches as the white man gets a fire going in a roughly made fireplace, pours water from a drum into an open can then, using a stick, lifts the can by its wire handle and places it over a small fire.

Won't be long, Flannigan calls.

The two men sit on their boxes sipping billy tea and chewing damper. It's the first meal Jabiru has had in ages. He gulps at the food, swilling it down with the hot tea while Flannigan looks on with an amused look on his face.

Odd seeing you out there, Flannigan says. Don't see any black fellas nowadays. Used to see a few. Don't know where they went. I was a bit worried when I saw you there. You seemed to come out of nowhere. Hear all sorts of stories, you

do. Blacks killing white settlers. Settlers massacring blacks. To hear some stories you'd think it was a war zone out here. But I haven't seen any of that. The few black people I've come across don't seem intent on any harm. Leastwise not to me. Still, can't be too careful... Had a mate with me once. Got spooked by you black blokes. Couldn't take the solitude either. Went back to town. On my own now.

Flannigan stops talking, looks across at Jabiru.

You seem pretty strong Jacky. Want to stay for a bit. Help out? Can't offer money. Haven't got any. But there's free board and keeping...

Jabiru nods.

Well, Flannigan says, slurping the last of his tea and rising, guess we'd better get to work.

Jabiru follows the white man to a bare paddock. In the middle is a small yard half fenced with mulga posts and wire.

Sheep pen, Flannigan explains. Got to get this blasted rail up.

He indicates a roughly cut log lying on the ground between two posts. Dang hard work on your own.

They work all afternoon, inserting posts and pulling wire. After several hours, with the sun now low to the west, Flannigan steps back, cocks his head like an artist checking progress, and says, Looks fine to me. What do you think Jacky?

Jabiru smiles and offers a mumbled word of appreciation.

Tomorrow, Flannigan continues, we'll do the gate and that'll be it. Sheep'll love it.

Back at the shack Flannigan invites Jabiru to share some meat and damper and some by now very strong billy tea. They sit round the fire as the sky darkness and stars innumerable come out. Cold comes down from the sky.

Time for bed Jacky, says Flannigan. Early start in the morning mate.

Right boss, says Jabiru in the manner he learnt from the limeworkers.

Flannigan laughs. Never been called boss before, he says. But that'll do for now. Anyway, you can sleep over there.

Flannigan points Jabiru in the direction of a small wooden shed with roughly thatched roof.

Jabiru walks off.

Wait, says Flannigan. I'll get you a blanket.

With Flannigan's blanket under his arm Jabiru goes to the shed, which is half full of freshly cut hay. He is tired. He wraps himself in the blanket and sinks into the warm hay. It's the first night he's been comfortable and warm in a long time. Some time in the night he dreams that he is a child running along a beach. His old mother is there, waving. He goes to her but she vanishes. All that's there is a shape at the waters edge. The shape assumes frightening proportions. He turns away, sees his mother over by the fringing mangroves. She is walking away. He enters the dark trees but she's not there. He tries to call out to his mother but no words come. He goes back onto the beach. A shape is coming, rolling along the beach, getting all the time bigger, closing out the light until all is black. He is frightened, hears himself call out. He wakes. It is dark. Cold. He is in the hay. It is warm but the air is cold on his face.

Somewhere far away a night bird calls. A curlew. Cry of lost children. He turns over, settles to sleep.

More dreams come. He is on a small boat. A fire burns in the boat, sending smoke upwards. Somewhere a man is calling. He goes to the man. A crowd of people calls out, others are curled up asleep. He is a boy, running with other boys towards a fire but the fire recedes as they approach and he is running faster, running and running towards the fire but he never reaches it.

He rises in the cold dawn. Flannigan is over by the hut cooking breakfast damper in hot coals. Nearby a blackened billy boils over its own, separate flames. Flannigan calls him over and they share damper and billy tea.

Sleep well Jacky? Flannigan asks.

Slept very well boss, Jabiru lies.

Together they work the run, Flannigan talks unceasingly in a lyrical Irish patter that Jabiru understands is as much for the man's own company as for his. Even if he were not there Jabiru knows that Flannigan would talk this way, addressing

fence posts and wire, and more animate objects such as newborn sheep, as if they contained the souls of lost or distant ones.

Fence posts and wire

Dead trees

The empty plains

It's a poem, Flannigan says to the astonished Jabiru. Sort of anyway.

In more lucid moments Flannigan talks directly to Jabiru about his plans for the run. Jabiru does not understand all that the man says but gathers Flannigan believes there's a good future in sheep and that there's plenty of land to run them on, that he will persevere and become rich and build a fine homestead to which he will one day bring a wife and have a large family.

This, it seems to Jabiru, is the white man's way and he wonders, yet again, how this can be, and why it is that he cannot entertain such dreams.

Jabiru works on the run all through winter and into spring. He is happy. He can see the results of his labours: new fences, stockyards, sheds... There is even a dam dug with great labour that Flannigan hopes will fill in the next rain. Jabiru loves working with the horses, mustering and riding the wide open downs in search of missing sheep. He likes the way hills suddenly appear on the flat horizon, blue and far away. From the high parts Jabiru can sometimes see the ranges far to the east. At such moments he has an urge to go there; to cross the high range and go back down to the coast and on to his home. The season turns to Summer. The tops of the far ranges are hidden in thick cumulus clouds. Beyond those ranges is a different country, a land that is warm, moist and green. Beyond those ranges lie the coastal plains and, beyond them the bay. Across the bay is his island home. Often, sitting his horse, Jabiru will look towards those ranges and be tempted to go. But he does not go. He loves the life on the high dry plains. He is happy on Flannigan's run.

He earns the respect of the tough horse-loving Flannigan, who confides to Jabiru over a billy tea, I love this country you know. Never expected I would. Didn't know what I was getting into when I set out from Ireland. My family thought I was nuts. I'll never go back, you know. To the old country, that is.

And Jabiru is pleased for the man called Flannigan who has come from a country far away, even as he wonders how it is that Flannigan can so easily assume ownership of the land, and how it is that he, a black man, cannot. Why is it, he asks himself yet again, that he can't be like Flannigan and own some land.

After a long day of mustering, yarding sheep for shearing, followed by the usual damper and billy tea, and with Flannigan gone to his bed in the hut, Jabiru lies in the hay, relishing the warmth. At first he sleeps soundly but towards dawn he wakes in a cold sweat. The dreams have returned. This is a pattern; after even the best of days he will be visited by dreams. In one the face of a cow appears, all bloody and beaten. The cow face turns into a human face. It is Charles Piper. He is covered in blood and his eyes look up at Jabiru; eyes full of fear. Through these dreams of violent confrontation he writhes uncomfortably. Until at last, with the first pink light of dawn spreading out across the eastern sky, he falls into a deep sleeps, his blanket pulled tightly around him.

He rises late, sun blazing through the slats of the shed. Flannigan, who normally wakes Jabiru, is not around. Jabiru wanders across the paddock to the yards. Flannigan is nowhere to be seen. It's quiet. There's no wind. A lone crow calls from a dead tree beyond the yards. A pair of wedge-tails circle lazily in the blue sky. A flight of screeching corellas fly overhead. Jabiru follows the flight of the Corellas, notes the circling eagles high above them, then looks towards the hut. There's no movement there. No smoke rises from the makeshift iron chimney. Something isn't right. Jabiru walks to the hut, calling Flannigan's name as he goes. There is no answer. He goes to the door. It's open. He peers into the darkness within. Nothing! Jabiru stands at the threshold, adjusting his eyes to the dark. He enters. There, on the floor, is the bloody body of Flannigan, a spear through his chest, his head split open and a mess of brains. Flannigan's gun lies broken to one side. The flywire safe is open and empty. A trail of flour leads towards the door.

A gust of wind hits one of the wooden flaps on the side of the hut that serves as a window. It smashes against the wall. Jabiru jumps, spins around. There is no one. Through the open window there is just a blaze of blinding white light. The window

flaps open, then shuts violently. A gust of wind slams the door closed. It's dark. Jabiru freezes. He waits, listening. The wind goes as suddenly as it came. It is still. Quiet. Nothing moves. Whoever came in the night to do this deed has long gone. Jabiru settles his nerves, tells himself that the killers, fearing retribution, would be far away by now.

He goes to the door and props it open. He secures the window flap. He goes out and scans the horizon. Nothing. He goes back inside, looks down at his friend's body. Already there are ants. He contemplates riding to the nearest neighbour, a Scotsman named Burns he's met several times and who seemed friendly enough. But Burns' place is a long way off and there's no guarantee the Scotsman will be at home. He drags the body out past the little vegetable garden Flannigan had made just weeks ago.

For the missus, he'd told Jabiru as they'd dug the earth and planted some dry seeds that never took, whenever it is I can find one.

Jabiru buries the body in a shallow grave under a mulga tree. He's worried that someone might come yet he finds the time to make a rough cross and place it at the head of the grave. When it is done he stands over the grave, his mind racing. Sheep bleat from the paddock; a mournful sound. Flannigan had organised shearers. They will be here in a few days. In a panic Jabiru rides off on one of Flannigan's horses. He rides fast and far to the east, riding until the horse will go no further then dismounts and walks on. The horse follows for a while, then stops to graze.

Jabiru walks on. He walks across the downs in Flannigan's clothes and boots. He considers discarding the clothes but it's a long time since he has faced the world naked and vulnerable so he keeps them, swearing to keep out of harms way. On the second day a dust cloud appears from the east. From the shelter of a stand of trees he watches as the cloud evolve into riders. Like skeletal apparitions they come on, riding fast. Ghostly avengers. The riders, six in all, pass by. The leading two are in the uniform of soldiers, three are clad in farmer's clothes and the last, a black man wearing tattered trousers and an old military coat. All the riders have rifles. The black man holds his upright like a spear. They look about as they go but Jabiru is well

hidden. He stays within the cover until the riders have disappeared into the west. Retribution will fall on the first black people encountered, guilty or not.

He walks on. The nights are warmer and he is able to sleep out in the open in relative comfort. But instead of cold he is tormented by demons. The dead will not go away. He sees them in dreams, frightening white ghosts hovering beneath the stars. People scream and cattle bellow. Blood flows in endless streams. In one dream he is trying to butcher a cow with a blunt knife but the cow turns into a man who struggles against him, calling as he does for his mother. And as they struggle the useless knife becomes soft and pliable, bending against the man-cow like a wet limp stick. There are other dreams too, that rise to the surface as if from a deep well of stored nightmares. Sometimes weird calls come out of the flat blackness and he has to leave the fire fearing someone will see him.

Yet there are moments of wonder through these days. Like the sight of a thousand cockatoos covering a lonely trees, turning it into a great blossoming thing stark white against the blue, or the simple beauty of a distant line of river gums along a watercourse, or a pair of eagles circling effortlessly in the blue sky. By observing the things around him, taking in what the country offers, he is able to fight off bad thoughts and, in this way, pace himself through the long and lonely days.

He enters rolling downs country made green by recent rains. To the east, maybe two day's walk, the blue ramparts of the great range he crossed with Shorty rise from the undulating plains. The track he had picked up some way back has become a road. Signs of white settlement are everywhere across this verdant country. Cart marks lead off the road to new holdings. At one gate he stops, his eyes following the furrows of cartwheels to a distant and seemingly substantial homestead. He wonders for a moment about going down that path but the moment passes. He walks on towards the mountains that now seem much closer.

He passes a lone white man heading west. The man looks desperately tired. No word is spoken as they pass. There are, Jabiru realises after the man has disappeared, white men like him, men without a home and nowhere to go, men

seeking something beyond their understanding. Jabiru knows that the man is walking to his death.

A small dust cloud rises in the east. It comes slowly towards him. Fearful lest it be riders Jabiru seeks the shelter of nearby trees. From his hide he watches the thing approach. It's a family - mother, father and three children - on a rickety cart. They pass by. They seem sad. There is sadness upon the land.

He catches up to a small group of black people heading east. For a while he walks with them. He tries to talk to them but they only shake their heads and turn away. Jabiru continues on alone. At the outskirts of a scruffy white settlement he comes to a camp of black people. The people are tired and beaten and in poor condition. He sits there in that grim and dirty camp, the only strong man among sag-breasted women and dirty dribbling children and feeble old men and mangy dogs. They speak a language Jabiru does not understand but he learns, by way of signs and spoken words, that they've come in from the desert country far to the west; that great plains country over which, Shorty once told him, people had hunted for generations. Only now there is no place for them to hunt.

Jabiru looks about the camp. Where are the young men, he asks an old man.

Gone that way all right, the old man replies, indicating the east. Gone to the big town.

It's dusk. All about the camp small fires flicker. The dogs are quiet. Into this scene of dark despondency comes a man in a long black coat and a wide-brimmed black hat, followed by three men carrying bundles. The people in the camp stir but they do not rise. They sit waiting, not daring to move for they do not know this stranger. The man in the coat stops before the largest fire and holds out a wooden cross.

Blessed are the meek, he says.

Then he turns to the men behind him and says, pointing to the ground, put them here.

The men place their bundles on the ground.

Salvation is in the Lord Jesus Christ, says the man in the long black coat.

Then he turns and leads the other white men away.

In the morning the people go to the bundles and take from them what clothes they fancy.

Jabiru selects an old shirt, a pair of long grey pants, a pair of socks and a good pair of sturdy boots, puts these on and goes away from that camp. He comes to a small settlement where black people lie dead drunk in the dirty street. A drunken white man emerges from a squalid grog house and utters threatening oaths at Jabiru. Jabiru stops and glares at the man. And in that puffy drunken face he sees the face of Piper. Anger rises. He steps towards the white man but the white man steps back, holding quivering arms up in pathetic defence.

S...s...s...sorry, the man splutters. Is...is...is...

The anger that had boiled up in Jabiru fades; he could have beaten the coward to a bloody pulp, and for a moment there he was sorely tempted, but he walks away. On the outskirts of the town he comes to a small wooden church with a metal steeple. It is the first such building he has seen. It sits in a bare yard surrounded by a white picket fence. Framed within the door to the church is a dark figure. It is the man in the coat and hat; the one who delivered the clothes. The man looks at Jabiru from beneath the wide-brimmed hat and raises his hand in a welcoming gesture. He walks down the path and through the gate and stands beside Jabiru and places an arm on Jabiru's shoulder.

Welcome, the man says in a soft and comforting voice, to the house of God.

I close the manuscript. She's asleep. I get up, find a blanket, place it over her and go to my own bed. But sleep doesn't come. I lie awake, troubled by this story I'm telling and wondering where it's going. I can't get Jabiru out of my mind. His story has become so intertwined with my own story that it sometimes threatens my handle on reality. More than once of late I've become confused; have woken in the middle of the night after a dream in which I am he and he is me and I'm left with this terrible feeling that the young man who became Jabiru was in fact me and that my rapidly fading life is no more real than that of my character.

I too escaped west. Went west to London where, after a few ill-paying jobs and some rough shared accommodation, I landed a job in an engineering firm in the city. I took out a lease on a tiny but outrageously expensive flat a long way from where I worked. I settled into a routine, going by the tube each working day from my bleak flat to my equally bleak office. I didn't mind. I was young and London was where I wanted to be. I began going to the opera and to plays at the West End. I visited galleries large and small and gradually built a collected of small etchings that fitted my tiny walls. I was becoming cultured.

I stopped playing sport, grew flabby and listless, kidded myself that I was happy to be where I was, but deep down I was lonely and unsettled. My consolation was Europe: the old world. I could pretend that I was part of that, pretend that I liked the cold winters, even argued to myself that culture needed cold. I visited famous towns and historic sites, grand cathedrals and museums. One time when I was suffer a bout of homesickness I managed to find a copy of the Courier Mail and was instantly cured! I'd left Brisbane. I was settled in what I considered my new home. There was no point in even thinking of returning.

Single life suited me. At least that's what I told myself. Now and then I'd meet someone and wonder if I was in love but nothing lasted. I guessed I wasn't cut out for long-term relationships. Most women found me a bit obsessive. Maybe they just didn't see any real prospects in one so lacking in ambition. Most of the time I didn't mind. It was good to be free, to have my flings, to saviour romance when it suited me. No complications. That was the way to go.

Then, totally unexpected, Mary Wright called.

Watcha up to lover boy, she oozed down the phone in a voice I instantly recognised.

I mumbled something unintelligible.

Got time for a drink with an old friend, Will?

We met at her hotel, stayed for ages at the bar chatting, she sipping wine, me downing warm beer. She was working as a flight attendant with Qantas, flying international and occasionally overnighing in London. I asked her how she got my

number. She said Billy Drahaam had given it to her. Said she'd met him at a high school reunion. I found that weird. She hated high school. Left as soon as she could. I told her that I too had received an invitation to the reunion but that I could never go back there. Then I went into a long rave about Brisbane and Queensland and the political and how bad it was. She interrupted, said I needed to get over it; whatever 'it' was.

I couldn't stop looking at her. She was beautiful, even more beautiful than I remembered. But there was a change I couldn't quite pin down. She seemed more at ease with the world, seemed to have recovered her early confidence (the confidence 'that' bloody high school had dented). The way she spoke was different too, as if she'd had elocution lessons. I guessed it was more likely through her work; serving all those sophisticated people on those long international flights. I asked her if she was involved with anyone.

Why? she asked.

Just wondered, I lied.

There is someone, she said after a pause. Pilot. It's a bit on and off, but...

Then she laughed, said she said she had something to show me.

What is it, I asked.

It's in my room, she said. Want to come up?

It was an odd feeling going up in the lift with her. There always had been electricity between us, but this time, standing close to her, I could hardly control myself. I think she felt it too, or recognised the state I was in

She gave a little chuckle and held my hand. I found that incredibly sexy.

Nice room, I said as we entered.

They're all the same, she said. Could be anywhere. We often have early flights and I have to set the alarm. When I wake I often don't know where I am.

Early flight tomorrow, I asked.

No, she laughed. Thank God.

She poured two drinks and we sat on the couch chatting over old times for a bit.

You said you had something to show me, I said.

Hmm, she said, so I did.

Well, I said.

Wait, she said, and rose and went into the bathroom.

She emerged a few moments later with nothing on but a g-string and a tiny bra.

Bought these today. Do you like them?

Did I!

I stayed the night. It was great. Steamiest sex I'd ever had. She was always full on that way, but by this time she'd learnt a few new tricks. We didn't get much sleep that night. In the morning she was sweet. Soft. Maybe things had changed for me too; maybe I felt less intimidated by her, less eager to please. Maybe I understood, deep down, that there would never be anything permanent between us and that I'd better make the most of what I did have.

She had many overnights after that. Sometimes we'd stay at my place, sometimes at her hotel. They were good times. To my surprise she'd developed an interest in art. She spoke of going to the theatre and to galleries. Maybe she was trying to impress me. Which, if true, was a turn up for the books. Yet there was something about her I couldn't figure out; hints, every now and then, that she was trying to tell me something. It would happen late, after we'd had a few drinks. She would lean into me in a certain way and say something soft – too soft to hear - and I'd ask what and she'd say, Oh, nothing, and that would be that. But I knew that she was trying to tell me something, something important that concerned us. I never found out what it was. Not until much later.

Then she stopped coming. She wrote saying that her schedule had changed and that she was no longer doing the London run, that she was flying domestic, based in Brisbane. So that, I gathered, was the end of that. I missed her.

One summer my parents flew over to see me. They looked old. They didn't argue with each other the way they used to and appeared to have developed a fond regard for each other. Maybe it was even love. Whatever it was, my mother seemed

more at ease with the world. She commented that there wasn't much time left and she was going to make the most of it. I wasn't sure what she meant by that. All I know is that she made the most of her time in London, dragging my reluctant father (and me when I wasn't working) off to see the sights.

After a brief stay they went home. My father's parting words were don't come home for me son.

No Will, my mother added, you have your life here.

I didn't know what they meant. They both seemed to be speaking in riddles.

A few months later my mother rang. He'd passed away: Carcinoma of the stomach. They had known all the time! I was angry that they hadn't told me, that I'd not had the chance to farewell him. My mother's excuse was that I was studying for an exam (which I was) and that they didn't want to put me off.

Oh father, coming in the front gate on a Saturday afternoon with your sugarbag full of vegetables and fruit from the Roma Street Markets and your blueprint drawings from the shipyards and your flag for the football and your sad failures as a politician and your jokes that no one understood and your vegetable patch down the backyard and your workshop under-the-house and your lopsided smile and your overalls smelling of oil and your socialism. Why could you not say?

I flew back to be with my mother in her grief. The thing that saddened me most was tidying his things for disposal. There wasn't much; just his wardrobe, a small thing in the corner of the room with two doors and a couple of drawers that contained all the things he owned. Oh, and some tools neatly shadowed in an old wardrobe under-the-house.

In a drawer of the wardrobe I found a small box containing maybe a dozen small black and white photos. Most were of him and my mother, but one showed me as a four, maybe five year old child with him in his work cloths on the deck of what looks like a war ship. I sat on his side of the bed, gazing abstractedly at the image while memories surfaced, some vivid, others indistinct and all mixed up. I see them now...

There's a tramstop somewhere in the city. I'm with my father, standing in the middle of the road holding father's hand against the whoosh of cars passing, the tramstop crowd pressed together. There are American soldiers with small caps and big smiles, Aussie Diggers with turned up hats and bitter expressions, women with shopping bags. They are turning to stare at big military motor bikes roaring past leading a big dingy green staff car with a white star on the door and little American flags fluttering from dented mudguards, its dark windows closed, father whispering MacArthur and the American soldiers saluting. The car has gone and the crowd is clambering onto the tram clang clanging down Adelaide Street and round Petrie Bight, the steel girders of the Storey Bridge rising into empty sky above the river. We are screeching round The Valley Corner past McWhirters, tram wires sparking above the dirty streets, paper boys yelling papertelcityfinal, papertelcityfinal, drunken men stumbling from pubs, footpaths crowded with people, the tram going down Brunswick Street. We are at the river, walking close to the edge, sunlight dappled through leaves, casting moving patterns across the footpath, brown tidewater swirling below, two American soldiers swaggering along in uniforms and funny GI caps. One of them is saying g'day buddy and handing me a chewing gum, which I stuff into my mouth before father can see. We are crossing a narrow wooden gangplank, swirling brown water rushing far below. I'm holding father's hand, going onto the deck of a great grey sulking warship, father leading me along steel gangways and through dark alleyways and clanking steel doors. There's a cabin with a brass-ringed portholes through which I see glimpses of river water. We are at the front of the ship, father holding me up to peer through a gun barrel. The Story Bridge, framed in steel circle, looks small and far away. We are going down steel ladder to a dark, oil smelling engine room and there's a man in dirty overalls talking loudly above the noise to my father, both getting all excited about the Labor Party and Pig Iron Bob. It's dark and I'm small and frightened and I'm no longer in the dark engine room but in a dungeon dimly lit where overturned wooden pews and shattered plaster figures of Christ and Mary lie in dirty seepage water across a broken concrete floor and light from somewhere is shining on stained walls where faded pictures of the stations of the

cross hang all askew and dead candles lie on a dirty table and father saying this is a dead place remember that when you go to your confirmation in the church of your mother which is the church of the empire....

Other memories stirred of course, most too vague to recall. Now, years later, I wonder about my father's life. Questions rise unbidden; questions for which I have no answers. Whenever I try to think about death my mind goes blank. It's as if the human mind cannot cope, as if we are programmed to not enter that place lest it prove too overwhelming.

In the bottom of my father's wardrobe was an old Gladstone bag, the one he used to take to work. Memory flashed of him walking down the front path with it on his way to work. I took the thing out. Inside was a pair of overalls and a lunch box full of mould. Under a flap at the bottom of the bag, as if in hiding (from my mother?) I found a large tattered envelope. I pulled it out, wondering as I did what I'd find inside.

There was a wad of electioneering material, including some political fliers, a rather flattering photograph he used for his electioneering posters and some how-to-vote cards. I was putting the papers back when a torn piece of paper fell out. I picked it up. On it was scribbled what looked like a public library reference number and the word 'Doolan'. Attached to this piece of paper was another crumpled piece on which was written, in his hand, the following:

Jack Doolan, born 1843. Mother Molly Doolan, father unknown.

Jack Doolan m Grace Windsor 1861. Daughter Mary Windsor born 1862.

Mary Windsor m Alfred Traverse 1870. Son Edward born 1871.

Edward T m Ann Doherty 1889, son Harrold born 1892.

Harrold m Elizabeth Farrell 1914, son Albert (me) born 1917.

I stared at the scrap of paper. It contained revelations. If true – and my father had clearly been doing his homework – one of my ancestors was a convict woman. Maybe that wasn't so hard to believe – many of us had to have convict ancestry – but

what concerned me was the lack of reference to a father. Who could that have been? And then I remembered the time I'd been taken to see my grandfather and how dark he had been. I was young and the visit had been brief and not long after I'd gone with my father to South Brisbane and seen the black man taken away by the police.

In the quiet of my old room in my parent's house I mulled over this discovery and its possible consequences. And as I did the memories of both the occasion of the black man at South Brisbane and my dark grandfather sitting in that dark room – at least the memory I projected – became more and more vivid. Late at night, trying to sleep, I'd be troubled by thoughts that increasingly connected the two events. And I found myself fantasizing that my grandfather was part Aboriginal. There was no rational explanation for this and in truth my grandfather probably wasn't all that dark, more likely a mix of my own childish imagination and a dark room, but the idea persisted that there was a connection and that, maybe, the father to Jack – my grandfather's ancestor - was in fact Aboriginal. It was this thought – more an idea really – that led, I think, to the development of the story I'm now reciting, bit by bit, to Mary Wright.

I repacked the papers into the Gladstone bag, promising myself that I'd keep the bag and its contents always. I stayed for a while (at my mother's request) then, against her wishes, went back to London. I took my father's bag with me.

A year later I got a letter from an aunt saying that my mother was gravely ill. I went home in time to be with her as she lay dying, also of cancer. I hadn't thought much about my parents, had never really contemplated them being dead. Suddenly they were and it affected me more than I'd have thought. For the first time in my life there was no one close to share my little triumphs, no one who might care about what I did or what I achieved. I found that devastating. Tidying my mother's things was even more depressing than tidying my father's. There was more 'stuff' to deal with, including wardrobes full of clothes (including her wedding dress), dozens of shoes, jewellery, kitchenware, assorted vases and oddments and some ancient but worthless furniture. I got rid of most but kept the photo albums and some small personal things, including an uncompleted manuscript of what seemed to be a detective story, and two drawing books

full of watercolour paintings. After I'd finished I stood, a little shell-shocked, in the house my parents had worked so hard to buy and pay off. It was an empty shell, empty even of ghosts. I put it up for sale. The house sold quickly and I was left with some money, some memories, and little reason to stay.

I went back to London.

Not long after my return a strange thing happened.

I finished work, left the stuffy office and stood for a moment in the street, breathing in the bracing evening air before racing to catch 5.30 tube home. I did that most nights. It was automatic. I'd get a seat - by the window if I could - and settle down to unwind from the tension that had been building all that long frustrating day. This particular night got my chosen seat by the window, pulled out my book and settled back, intending to pick up where I'd left off that morning. But not long after pulling out of the station my attention was drawn to the window. You know how it is in tube trains, you look out the window and all you see is the reflection of the carriage interior packed with people. I saw that, to be sure, but I also saw something else.

Out there, beyond the reflection of the carriage interior packed with people, patterns of shifting light formed into vaguely familiar images. It was like a dream, and quite disturbing. I shrugged. Pressure of work I said to myself, and turned back to my book. But I could not concentrate. I looked back out the window. They were still there, those images, hovering in the dark void as the train rattled through the black tube, disappearing briefly as we entered neon-lit stations, then reappearing again. Through the images was a line that came and went like a tear through an old movie. I soon realised that it was just a power cable running along the tubes wall that, every now and then, caught the light. But as I stared at the long slow undulations of the cable it became a sinister thing, hypnotic and threatening, cutting across the images that assembled out there in the blackness, images that formed into real people, causing me to start in recognition and, in the process disturbing the reveries of nearby passengers who followed my gaze, wondering, perhaps, if I might have seen something dangerous out there. When it became clear that nothing threatened them

they gathered themselves back into their own commuter spaces, leaving me to my visions.

They flashed by, those images, most too fleeting to hold onto, but others were clear. In one I saw a child playing with a large black dog in a familiar back yard. It was the back yard of my childhood: the same wood paling fence overgrown with creepers, and the mulberry tree that shaded the chook run, and the ancient orange tree that was so tall I could climb from it onto the roof of the house, and the hedge along the back fence where giant grasshoppers lived, and my fathers vegetable patch and the clump of banana trees in the corner...

I was that child. I was throwing a stick and the dog was chasing it. From the landing at the top of the back stairs my mother laughed down at us. Further away, in the corner of the yard, my father was digging at the earth. It might have been the air raid shelter he never finished or it might have simply been a vegetable patch (both were strong memories) but that vision faded and the train ran on, rattling over points, jolting and rocking, carrying me away. Or so I thought. But out of the gloom more shapes loomed. Fleeting images came and went, slashed by the ragged line. I tried looking away, to force myself into my book, but I couldn't. Even without looking the images kept coming, mostly not clear enough to pin down, except that they were clearly from my childhood. After a while the experience became almost pleasant, like looking at faded home movies. Except for the planes. Which I hadn't seen at first, but which appeared, coming out of the dark like spectres. They were warplanes, some sitting silent and still out on a vast wet tarmac, others, beyond the tarmac, circling in out of a dark sky. The curving roof of a hanger, away in the distance, caught the light. Beneath the roof of that hanger was a blackness into which I was drawn. And a sudden remembrance: My grandfather, who worked at the airport as a clerk for the American forces, had taken me to show me where he worked (he did bookwork in a little office at the side of a hanger). It was near the end of the war and I was four, going on five. He'd taken me into the hanger and at first I was excited – all those aeroplanes and engines and men rushing about - but something had frightened me. I vaguely remember lights going out. So real was the remembered sensation of black

danger that I clutched at my seat in fright and, once again, disturbed the nearby passengers who, for a moment there, must have wondered if I might be dangerous.

I closed my eyes tight, fighting off the fear. After-images flashed, bits of memory floating away like torn photos in the wind.

I missed my station that night and had to go back two stops. Later, in the cold dimness of my pathetic little flat, I sat wondering about what had happened on the train. I thought I'd escaped all the old ghosts, that in leaving Brisbane and settling in a distant city I might become part of a wider, more sophisticated world. Truth is, it was all a game. The small dark flat I came home to at the end of each working day was a dank hole in a city I would never really belong in. I was, and would remain just one among millions, all strangers to each other, all struggling to survive daily grinds and escalating costs. No matter how long I stayed in that city I would never be part of it, would always be an outsider, alone in a one-bedroom flat, knowing all the time how pathetic it all was. At first it was all right because I was among history and culture, not stuck back in that hole of a place called Brisbane. But by the time the enchantment of Europe wore off it seemed too late and too difficult to go back. When I did think of returning I would remind myself that my parents were dead and that there was nothing, really, to go back to.

The images from the train kept reoccurring. They'd appear in unexpected situations; reflecting off shop window or shiny surfaces, sometimes shimmering before me like holographs. And always there was the line. Like a line through film but, also, like a crack in a glass! Sometimes there would be a sound that I could not pin down, one moment like the sound of many far away war planes approaching heavily laden, the next like the sound of wind in the telephone wires, only low and guttural with weird harmonics like the sound of the bull-roarer I heard once during a demonstration by Aboriginal men at the Ekka.

Then, one night Billy Drahaam called. The call, like Mary Wright's earlier call, was, as they say, out of the blue. To say I was surprised would be an understatement. Apart from anything else Bill hated travel, used to say there was no reason he could see for leaving Australia.

You there Will, I heard him calling down the line.

I told him I was sorry, that his call was, to put it mildly, unexpected. He laughed, said he was in town and could he come over. I felt an odd dread; the past was conspiring to catch up on me! It had been years since I'd last seen Bill. What did he want?

I looked in the mirror; saw my thinning hair and worn features, my sallow skin. I was no longer a skinny kid riding the trams or cycling the back blocks or hanging out with Billy Drahaam. I was a middle-aged man! I don't know why I thought it mattered what he thought. So what, I told myself; he'd have aged too!

He came the next night. I listened to the unmistakable footfalls of the big man coming up the stairs, then the doorbell chiming. I willed myself to rise to meet my past. I opened the door and there he was, older of course, but still the same big loping sloping giant of a man I'd always known, with that self-effacing manner of men who were unusually large when they were young and who, it seemed, could never accept their size. Big, soft Billy Drahaam, standing there puffing from the climb.

Mate, he said, its good to see you!

The mate bit threw me. It wasn't the sort of word he normally used. He'd changed. The quiet hulking boy who'd take a back seat in any disagreement had become more confident, had adopted the hail-fellow-well-met manner and the good bloke image of the local rugby club. Then I saw the Rotary badge. He'd become one of the boys. The way he used that word mate, with just a faint hint of sarcastic edge to the convivial front, rendering it at once both a term of endearment and a weapon. Only in Australia!

Interesting how someone entering your domain can highlight its shortcomings. I wasn't under any illusions about my flat but thought it had a certain charm, enhanced by some well-chosen artworks collected over several years. But as soon as Billy Drahaam entered I saw how small and mean it all must have seemed to him. Billy Drahaam, who'd made a small fortune with his fleet of taxis and who owned acreage halfway between the city and the Gold Coast, complete with swimming pool, private rain forests, dogs, wife and two kids. Was I envious? Maybe.

Did I think for a moment there that I could swap places? Riding round and round on a sit-on mower in an unending quest to keep the buffalo grass at bay; rising from an afternoon nap to stroll out over newly-mown lawn into some warm sub-tropic evening, sitting by a jade blue pool listening to exotic birds in the rainforest trees, driving to Tambourine Mountain on a sunny Sunday afternoon... Was my life, with its lonely flat and dead-end job in a dark and dirty city preferable to all that? Once I would not have even posed the question. Maybe for the first time I understood the attraction.

Billy Drahaam didn't comment on the flat. He was more concerned about keeping his six-pack cold. I directed him to the tiny fridge. He asked me where the food was, said he was bloody starving. I rang for some take-away. It came. We ate, drank and chatted. Then we ate, drank and chatted some more. He went on about Brisbane and how much it was changing, said that as a cab owner he got to know the pulse of the city; who was coming and going. Big business, he said, was taking an interest. He said the city was becoming a major player in the Asia Pacific region.

I had a sudden urge to go back, to see what it was really like, to revisit some of the old places before they disappeared. The times I'd gone back for my parent's funerals had not allowed for this. They'd been fleeting and full of remorse and, well, dealings with the dead.

What was it really like back home? There, I'd said the word: home!

You could go back, Billy Drahaam said, as if he'd been reading my thoughts.

But I wasn't ready. I told him I had nothing to go back to.

Billy Drahaam sipped beer, pondered, sipped more beer. That was the trouble with Bill; he'd take those long pauses in conversation, as if he couldn't think without a great deal of effort. I wondered how he managed his business with that kind of approach. When at last he spoke it was with feeling.

Bullshit Will. You could make a better life back there.

How, I asked.

He didn't answer immediately. I could see he was considering something.

Well, he muttered, his old self-consciousness re-emerging, I've got a job for you.

A job. What kind of job Bill?

You know my business. It's not what you'd call exciting, just a bunch of cabs making lots of money. Brisbane's a big town now Will. Lots of tourists, business people, conferences... Can't keep up. In fact I'm limiting myself, don't need to get any bigger. Too much trouble. But I could do with an administrator, someone to take care of the details. Just up your alley. I can't get good people, and if I do I can't keep them. It's not a difficult job. Well it is for me. It'd be a breeze for you. Good money too. More than you get here. How about it? No binding contract, and good holidays. You're alone. No ties.

Alone! No ties! Those words stung. Hit hard. But it was true. I had no one. Hadn't had anyone close to me for a long time. Apart from brief affairs that went nowhere there had been no one to share my life. And Mary Wright's visits had stopped. I had become a loner and wondered sometimes why that was. Billy Drahaam, on the other hand, had it all: wife, kids, rural property... And, it seemed, a certain inner happiness. One thing I knew; despite his outwardly easy and diffident manner Billy Drahaam was a pretty good judge of people, understood their feelings, felt their needs. Maybe that's why he succeeded in the cab business. All those cabbies with their appalling English and terrible habits; he had to deal with them. And he did. It was something he'd always had beneath the soft slow bulk of him: an ability to empathise. He'd always helped me out. I remember how it used to be as kids, Billy Drahaam large and slow and me small and quick and sometimes fiery, getting into trouble at times with my silly smart-arse provocations. It'd be him, Billy Drahaam, who'd step in and diffuse things. Now, after all these years, he was in my flat offering a way out of another fix.

You could come back Will. The place has changed. It's a great city.

Maybe it was the beer, but I was suddenly annoyed. I felt again that old belligerence I'd sometimes felt towards my friend's simple naivety. And towards the city I thought had failed its promise. I looked at Billy Drahaam and saw complacency.

He had never really questioned anything, had always accepted whatever came along. Brisbane was his home, a place he accepted, was maybe even proud of, but it was all he knew. He hadn't objected to anything; not the Vietnam war, not the Springbok tour. Nothing! I remembered his reaction to the destruction of the tramways. Maybe those things shouldn't have mattered, but they did.

I exploded.

Bill, you're pathetic! How could anyone be proud of that third rate city at the edge of nowhere?

And I went on a long diatribe about how nothing of substance, or anything to be proud of was ever hacked out of that sweaty godless place peopled by the offspring of third-rate Europeans who shot, starved, poisoned and expropriated the land of a pitifully weak people and since then relied on luck for whatever progress has been made, that the only battles of any consequence our forefathers fought were on foreign soil, and haven't we heard enough about them...

I was angry and I wasn't sure why.

Bill just shook his head, topped another beer, took a swill, said, Does it matter Will? Would you prefer: a place like this with its bloody history? Or somewhere with a *really* bloody history! Maybe a civil war or two! Alls I'm saying is Brisbane's OK. It's just a place to live, and it's got a lot going for it. What sort of history do you want? Bloodshed? Some battle for territory that you of all people would never be involved in...you the famous anti-war demonstrator. You can't have it both ways; can't complain about wars and at the same time wish for some more bloody past.

I was so taken aback by this unexpected and uncharacteristic broadside that I apologised, meekly explained that I'd just feel out of place.

We sat in silence.

Within that uneasy silence memories floated. Odd things. Like going to the Ekka. I asked him if he remembered how we went there once when we were kids.

He thought for a moment. Sure, he said, all you were interested in, Will, was boring stuff like cattle stalls and tractors and cars and woodchops. I wanted to go to sideshow alley but you wouldn't. Like it was beneath you.

We had a bit of a fight about that, I reminded him.

He laughed.

I didn't tell you Will, but I went back the next day. Spent all day in sideshow alley.

I laughed in turn, told him that I had gone back too, that I'd spent all day at the cattle pavilions and the wood chops and the agricultural machinery stalls and the motor pavilions.

I liked the Ekka... all those big countrymen in their tweed coats hanging about the cattle stalls or wood chop arenas or the Countryman's bar. I found them fascinating. They were probably Country Party members and ultra right wing, the kind my father hated, yet they were, well, real people. They looked so big and strong. They were what the Ekka was all about for me: the country coming to the city. The Ekka had it all; city kids at sideshow alley and farmers at the sheep and cattle stalls, sheepdog trials, starry-eyed fathers and teenagers at the motor pavilions.

But later, as Queensland descended into ultra-conservatism, I came to see those big countrymen in a different light. The last time I went to the Ekka, just before I left, they no longer seemed so big, or important. I saw them as remnants of a past they tried to maintain was noble but wasn't. They were the offspring of squatters, men who'd battled a merciless country they thought was theirs. Yet they possessed something city people lacked. They had belief. They might have been offspring of men who'd participated in god knew what outrages against the original inhabitants in order to secure their land, they might have been supporters of politicians with histories of ripping through the Brigalow scrub with giant bulldozers and tearing down heritage buildings in the dead of night, and maybe they were mates of men who cheered when the tram lines were pulled up. Still, they were men; types who'd done hard yards.

Penny for your thoughts Will.

Billy Drahaam's question broke my reverie.

Oh, just thinking Bill. Thinking about Brisbane! Wondering how you could expect me to want to go back to that backwater.

You're being a bit harsh Will. Isn't that bad. Things have changed. Are changing. It's a different city to the one you left. And anyway, what's so fucking great, or so bloody different, about this overblown dark hole of a place?

I had no answer.

It's late Will. I'd better be going. Think about my offer.

With that he left.

I sat up, unable to sleep, annoyed by my own righteous indignation. Unpleasant thoughts came back, of growing out of the certainties of childhood into an adult world that I could not easily embrace. It had been difficult. I'd become disillusioned. You're a carping critic, Billy Drahaam once said. And it was true that I had looked too critically at the world, and in the process had become a pain to those around me. I saw myself, at times, from their side and was embarrassed. But I couldn't help it. At first my anger was expressed through behaviour that was confronting to those closest to me, but as the years passed I began to feel trapped in a world that made no sense. The absurd certainties that were part of my parents world - and which most of my peers accepted - were being eroded. Only they didn't see that and I would get frustrated.

That frustration would emerge at times least expected and I'd get angry and end up in trouble. Despite relative success at college, and a decent, if mundane job in the public service I'd lash out every now and then. The time before I left was the worst. I'd rant at a political system that was corrupt. I joined demonstrations against the Vietnam War, ended up in the city watch-house one night and missed the boat to Straddy where, my non-protesting friends would report back with smug superiority, I'd missed the best surf in ages.

The day after that rather tense night I rang Bill at his hotel and convinced him to stay at my place for the rest of his 'holiday'. He never brought up the subject of my returning home again. It was a pleasant week. I showed him the sights and took him

to the theatre and to good restaurants. I could see that he wasn't overly impressed but he went along with it all in good cheer. It was like old times, with me leading the way and him patiently following along. It felt good. I was proud to show him around, as if I was showing off my own city, but during that week I began to seriously consider returning.

Sometimes, deep into nights of no sleep, those images from the tube would intrude, forcing me to get up and walk about, wondering what the hell was going on. I was forty-two. How was it that I'd ended up alone so late in life? One night I had a vivid dream. I was high up, looking down. Way below me I could see a line cutting its way through a dark forest. As it went the forest on either side disappeared, leaving blankness. As I looked the line expanded, grew wider, became a great solid concrete slab covering the land. I had to stop it because under that slab all memory was being buried. I didn't want all those memories lost, no matter how painful they might be. I began digging frantically, trying to get beneath the slab, to save the things it was covering, but the slab kept expanding, obliterating everything in its path. I had this terrible fear that however much I might seek the past I would never find it. Except, perhaps, in hidden places where the concrete had not reached. I had to get to those places before it was too late, before the slab covered all the old places, all memories. People were wandering among the ruins searching for entries into the underworld. I was among them. We were a small army digging into cracks in a concrete field vast as a lunar landscape. Memories seeped like marsh gas through the cracks. I was racing across a vast concrete barrenness, seeking fissures, cracks, broken surfaces, anything that would allow me in; that would allow me to retrieve even some small memory. But all I saw, whenever a crack did appear, was a terrible void filled by people without proper faces.

I wake in a cold sweat. For a moment I think I'm back there in London. But I'm not; I'm on my balcony and it's surprisingly cold. I go inside, pour a stiff whisky, swill it down and prepare for bed.

7

The days are noticeably shorter. Cooler too. I'm inside thinking about Mary, who I haven't seen for several weeks. I think about Billy Drahaam who, likewise, I haven't seen for some time. We go back a long way us three. And Gary Lee. I think about how people change. Or don't. I recall a scene in a classroom. Grade five I think it was. It's a big class; maybe forty kids sitting at wooden desks, their flat sloping wooden tops palimpsests of initials and faded messages. An aisle divides the room: boys on one side, girls on the other. Five rows of five on each side. I'm in the second back row of boys with Gary Lee and three other kids. Donald Potts and Trevor Smeel are in the back row with the bright kids. Billy Drahaam is in the row in front of me. In the front row are a couple of big kids who never completed primary school. They were the one you avoided. Mary Wright is in the middle row of on the girl's side, sitting next to Gloria Green. Maureen Walker, the black girl who hardly ever spoke, is in the front row. I think about those kids and how much, if any, they changed as they grew. I never saw Donald Potts or Trevor Smeel after primary school but I don't think they'd have changed much. Potts, humourless and intense, would have ended up a professor in some university, his mind concentrated, oblivious to the petty cares of the world. Smeel, capable of humour, would have become some sort of financial wizard or businessman. Both would be successful people, with fixed ideas of who they were and their place in the world. Gary, who went into law, was a bit like that. Knew what he wanted. So, to some extent, was Bill, only he was less assured, his ambitions less lofty. Gloria Green didn't change. Loud fat Gloria Green, pregnant at seventeen (or was it sixteen), ended up in real estate, with a big house at Ascot, big husband, big kids, big cars. Maureen Walker was the real surprise. She was so quiet at school; so timid you felt sorry for her. But I found out much later that she became an activist for Aboriginal rights and a successful artist. You never knew!

Mary changed. Over the years I saw that change; saw the bravado she displayed at primary school replaced by insecurity as the going got tougher and the way she hid her insecurity with a façade of worldliness and, at least towards me, a certain condescension. Then, during that time in London, I noticed a further change, as though she'd come through insecurity into an easy acceptance of what life offered up. I loved her and I hated her. Now she's sick and I'm sorry.

She calls. Says she's back in hospital for a short spell and that she'd love to see me; that she is eager to find out what happens to my character Jabiru. I tell her I'll come straight away. I find her in good spirits. She's back in a larger ward with people everywhere. There's a general air of good cheer, unlike the previous occasions I'd visited her in hospital. I'm not sure why this is; think maybe it's a new approach from the hospital staff.

I sit beside her and tell her she looks great. She chuckles. I notice a difference in her voice; it's more gravely. Like a smoker's I think, though she never did smoke seriously.

Cat got your tongue, she says.

I laugh, tell her my bedside manner was never that great. She chuckles again, that same deep troubled rattle. It scares me.

Want to hear more of the story, I ask, changing the subject.

She nods.

I open my manuscript (too eagerly perhaps) and begin to read.

Jabiru goes back through the same forest he and Shorty had traversed with the timber-getters. At the edge of the escarpment, where the road begins its steep descent, he stands looking down through thin drifting clouds. Warm moist air drifts up from the undulating plains below. He takes a deep breath. And in that breath he smells faint traces of sea air. Somewhere out there, further than he can see, is the sea and, across the bay, his island home. From the fertile plains below, between darkly wooded hills and the rugged plugs of long extinct volcanos, smoke rises from cleared patches of land.

He goes down the steep and winding road. Rain forest gives way to sclerophyll forest. Tall white-trunked gums rise from bottomless gullies, seeking light. The scent of eucalyptus is strong. Tangled undergrowth presses in on the rough dirt road, threatening to obliterate it. He passes by waterfalls and the last bits of rain forest. The road becomes less steep and the air changes into a familiar warm humidity he finds comforting. Unlike the interior, where sweat would evaporate immediately during the day and stick like ice at night, this moisture plays on his skin, sticking until the breeze blows it away.

The road bends to the south and he enters lower rainforest. A waterfall cascades down an exposed rock face into a deep pool. Jabiru stops to drink. The water is cool and sweet. All around him the humid bush hums with life. Cicadas buzz and birds of many kind call. Somewhere deep within the bush he hears the thump, thump of a wallaby. He goes through a bellbird colony, their calls chiming in the humid air.

The road levels out. He walks on through undulating country interspersed with low hills and volcanic plugs. Felled trees and piled-up undergrowth smoulder in untidy heaps in the middle of bare paddocks. Ring-barked trees stick ungainly out of the undergrowth, waiting the axeman's blade. So much damage in so little time! Only the upper slopes of the thickly forested hills, and the ancient plugs of volcanoes seem safe from the carnage. In fields where trees had been there is ploughed earth and, in some places, tidy rows of fruit trees and vegetables. Along the water courses protecting banks have been cleared. Recent rains have washed away topsoil, forging narrow cuttings of exposed earth. From the makeshift chimney of a rough shack set back from the road white smoke drifts skywards. Between cultivated rows of vegetables, women move slowly under broad hats beneath a blazing sun.

A man approaches, bearing upon his shoulders a heavy sack. As he nears Jabiru the man stumbles, falls to one knee and drops the sack. Jabiru runs to the man and helps him to his feet. The man, a great lumbering giant, towers over Jabiru.

Danke, the man says.

And sticks out a great paw, which Jabiru involuntarily takes, suffering an iron grip.

There is strength in that work-worn hand.

Otto. Ihr name Otto Schultz, the big man says. Und ihr name?

The words are strange but their meaning clear.

Jacky, he says. They call me Jacky.

Ah, you have English. I am German. I speak... little English. You understand?

Jabiru nods.

You come, the German says, hoisting the sack onto his back. Follow...

They come to a hand cart laden with sacks similar to the one Otto carries. Jabiru helps load the sack onto the wagon. They go from that place, the German pulling by two long handles, Jabiru pushing. They turn off the rough road and go down a narrow path towards a small cottage with a thatched roof. Smoke rises from a metal chimney. A woman appears at the front door. She shades her eyes with her hand.

My wife, Otto says in English.

He lowers the cart and goes towards the house, calling Jabiru after him.

Otto says something to the woman, who turns and goes inside.

You would like some dinner?

Jabiru nods. He is hungry.

Days pass. Jabiru helps around the farm, sleeping in a little lean-to beside a hayshed. It is not like Flannigan's run. Otto's farm has been cut from dense bush, the soil is soft and deep and there are no distant horizons. Instead of dusty sheep there are planted rows of trees and vegetables and a few fat cows for milking. Unlike Flannigan's run where the next neighbour was a day's ride away, Otto's farm is part of a close-knit community of small farms run by German settlers.

When Otto speaks with these people it is in the language of his old country. Only with Jabiru does he try to communicate in the language of the colony. There is sadness about the man that Jabiru has not encountered before among the white people he had met. He had encountered anger and bitterness, but not sadness. It was as if some great tragedy had befallen the man called Otto. One day Jabiru is working with

Otto in the cornfield when the big man suddenly stops, kneels on the bare earth he has just turned and holds his large hands together in prayer. He stays like this for a long time, kneeling in the dirt, leaving Jabiru perplexed.

One Sunday, at Otto's invitation, Jabiru goes with the family to a little weatherboard building that is the district's Lutheran church. At the front door Jabiru stops. The German motions him in but something stops the black man. He cannot go in there. Otto Schultz shrugs and follows his family inside, leaving Jabiru to wander the grounds. He finds himself in a graveyard with tiny graves of children and sad stone monuments to dead adults. So new to the country, these people, so many already dead. Jabiru wonders about the country those people have come from and why they left it.

From inside the church strong voices rise in song. There is a community in there seeking strength from a god Jabiru can never know. A breeze blows about the churchyard, whispering through the she-oaks. It is an old voice. It is not the voice of the European God. The voice is saying something but Jabiru cannot comprehend its meaning. There are these two voices; the one coming muted from within the church, the other coming from the sky and the trees.

And there is Jabiru, between the two.

Otto does not invite Jabiru to the church again and Jabiru knows that he has failed some unspoken test. Otto remains friendly enough but there is coolness towards him from the others. Jabiru is an outsider and can never be part of that community.

He walks away. He travels through undulating scrubby country until he comes to a hill overlooking the place where he'd worked with Shorty and the lime gatherers. What had been a collection of humpies was now a sizable town, with large stone buildings and houses laid out along streets in neat patterns. On the riverbank, not far from where the limekilns were, black dust swirls around men loading black rocks onto a barge. The men are blacker than Jabiru. From a chimney, rising from a rough stone and iron building across the river, black smoke rises into the air. A smell Jabiru will later know as burning coal floats up the hill towards him. He sniffs the not unpleasant smell. One end of the building is open to the river. From his position on

the opposite bank Jabiru can see right in. Within those walls beneath a roof of iron men are working at forges and benches. Flames fly up, silhouetting the tiny men in their aprons. It is a scene beyond dreams, one straight from some underworld Jabiru could not have imagined. And there are strange sounds: hisses and thumps and clanging noises. Outside, in a yard surrounded by rippled iron fences, lie bits of machinery: broken wheels, bits of boilers, upturned carriages, rods of steel...

Jabiru sits on the grass looking over this untidy mess of industry. How can it be, he wonders, that such a thing has come about in such a short time. He had seen the ships at the island dock, and those on the river in the Mianjin town, he'd seen the high walls of the jail from within which had come those dreadful cries, but he's never seen anything like what he now sees before him. They are like ants, he thinks; a busy hive of ants working to a pattern as predetermined as that of any ant's nest.

Where, he wonders again, do all these men come from.

He does not go into the smoking town but walks on through Goodna and Darra and Yeerongpilly until he comes once more to Brisbane town. Like Ipswich, Brisbane is much changed. In streets where soldiers once trod heavy booted and grim, and convicts walked in sullen anger, people hurry about with a driven sense of purpose. There are no black people on the streets. It is as if they had never existed. On the riverbank he wanders along the newly made wharves. Boxes and crates are piled high. Goods of every kind await shipment. Shirtless men are everywhere, loading and unloading cargo. Out on the river a steam dredge loads river muck onto a waiting barge. Jabiru sniffs. Along with the familiar smell of river mud is a new smell. It is the smell of oil, seeping out from engines and spreading patterns of colour across the water. He feels the driven energy. The town is like a growing organism.

Hoy, you!

Jabiru turns at the gruff voice, suffering a moment of dread. For just an instant he imagines soldiers coming to apprehend him for past crimes. But it's just a big-suited man with a cigar ambling towards him.

You looking for work mate, the big man asks as he nears.

Jabiru, surprised by the offer, isn't sure how to respond.

The big man repeats his question. Jabiru nods.

Well, see that bloke over there, the big man says, pointing to a rotund man in a tattered black Singlet supervising the loading of bales of wool, go see him. Tell him Jack sent you.

Jabiru joins a gang loading wool onto a ship called the *Sovereign*. It's a paddle steamer, with two giant paddles and a tall iron funnel. For two days they work, until the holds are full and the ship can take no more. He's there on deck, helping to tie down the last load, when the engines start.

Follow me, one of the men says. This is worth seeing.

They stand at the railing surrounding the open engine well, peering down into the bowels of the ship. Down there in the gloom the engine huffs and puffs and hisses like some huge beast eager to go. Jabirus eyes adjust to the dim light. There are men down there, scurrying about with oilcans and rags, wiping and adjusting, turning knobs. They seem far away, more like part of the machine than human beings. Coal smells waft up, reminding Jabiru of Ipswich town.

A safety valve blows steam. A foghorn sounds.

The supervisor calls out from the dock, Time to go men!

Jabiru stands on the dock with the other stevedores, watching as ropes are loosed from bollards, capstans cranked, anchor cables slowly and noisily drawn up. Cries of sea-faring men fill the air. The captain and pilot go on board. The gangway is raised and stowed. Still Jabiru stays. Until the foghorn blows twice and the ship is hauled out into midstream by a tiny tugboat. The great paddle wheels churn the brown water and the ship slides silently down the river and out of sight.

For many months Jabiru works the wharves. He is paid money and has new clothes. He is like a white man, strutting about the town and growing in confidence. Nobody confronts him. He is young, strong and virile. One Friday night after work he goes with two white fellow workers to a brothel run by a large Irishwoman going by the name of Madam May. Holy Mother Mary, she says with laughing eyes, a black man, and fine one at that, come to grace our establishment. Here's a first, she says

turning to two young women who've appeared from a back room, and one who shall have first pick of the ladies.

It is a first also for Jabiru who stands in awkward silence, averting his eyes from the almost naked ladies who stare openly at the fine-figured black man. Before the bora he had little interest in female company. After the bora there was little opportunity for him to relieve his increasingly urgent sexual urges other than through surreptitious and guilty wanking behind bushes in the middle of the night or towards dawn. Now, confronted by these brazen white females who seem unbothered by the colour of his skin and only too pleased to please him, Jabiru is decidedly discomfited.

Oh, the poor fellow is embarrassed, says the younger of the two young molls.
Come, says Madam May, we'll get you a fine cup of tea.

And she grabs Jabiru gently by the hand and leads him into the inner chamber followed by the two young molls.

Come back another time she says to Jabiru's companions as she parts the curtain and shepherds the Jabiru and the two young women through.

And so Jabiru, guided by two young but expert priests in the arts of lovemaking, passes through his second great rite of passage.

He continues working on the docks. He has money, becomes part of the crowd of this young and bustling town. He grows in confidence and rents a room in a worker's cottage in Spring Hill. The bad dreams have gone. Life is good. Every fourth Friday night he visits the brothel of his initiation. On days off he goes fishing on the banks of the river with a friend, an ex-convict and self-described poet by the name of Seamus who, whenever given the chance, recites to Jabiru short poems describing life in the town. In this way Jabiru begins to understand the rough colonial humour that had for so long eluded him. He feels part of the place and is content.

It's a fine day and, with no work on the wharves and feeling restless Jabiru wanders the back lanes of the south side. There's a soft breeze from the south and the sun is shining. All is well with the world. It is in this state of almost euphoria that he comes across a small band of black people gathered in a vacant bit of land. They are

the first of his people he's seen for some time and at first he is shocked. He is clean and dressed in white man's clothes. They are dirty and in cast-off rags. Two old toothless hags hold out their hands, palms upturned. Beggars! Black people begging! All of the disappointments of his people come flooding back. He is ashamed. One of the toothless women sidles forward and thrusts her open palm under his chin. She is small and misshapen; her thin legs like bones, her stomach bloated. He looks down on her. It's not pity he feels but disgust; disgust not just at the state of the people before him, but disgust at his own uselessness. He hands the woman what change is has and walks away, convinced that they have seen him not as a black man but as a dark-skinned white man.

The season turns. Work slows. Jabiru, along with many of his workmates, is laid off. Unable to find employment in the town and with no money for rent he walks out along the North Road. He has been told there is work out there with the farmers. Just north of Yorks Hollow a bullock cart loaded with logs approaches from the north. It lumbers past, heading for the town, driver's curses ringing, whips cracking like rifle shots. Jabiru smiles to himself, recalling the journey up the range with Shorty and those other timber-getters.

It goes on, he says to himself, and will never stop.

A horse-drawn wagon carrying a young man and woman passes by, heading north. They do not offer Jabiru a ride.

The scattered farms and fenced paddocks on the town's outskirts give way to uncleared woodland and pockets of dense lowland rainforest. In the middle of a creek crossing he comes upon a bogged dray piled high with building materials. It's the same wagon that passed him earlier. The woman, still wearing a large sunhat, is urging the horses on but they are stuck. The man, redheaded, red-bearded and not unlike Charles Piper in appearance, is trying to lever the dray out of its predicament with a large pole. Jabiru grabs the spokes of a wheel and pulls with all his strength. The dray is slowly freed. The red man thanks Jabiru and offers him a ride. They go on in silence until the sun begins its post-noon slide and the dray turns off the road and

Jabiru gets off and continues on alone. He has no real idea where he is going or how he might survive.

Jabiru stands at the top of a hill overlooking a broad green valley. Beyond the valley the undulating coastal plain stretches north. The plain is intersected by narrow streams, their shining waters strips of light. In the distance the great volcanic plugs of the Glasshouse Mountains stand out of the plains like sentinels. Beyond them, away to the north, are the pale blue ramparts of the fabled Bonyi Mountains. This is Geebung's country, of which he was proud. Jabiru had crossed the country before with Geebung and Jamboor but had never seen it from this perspective. For a long time he stands beneath that vast blue sky, gazing out over the land. He wants to embrace that country but can't. It isn't his. It has been polluted. Somewhere in that land lie the bones of Charles Piper.

At the bottom of the hill, to the side of the track and close by a broad running stream, he comes upon two white men attempting to erect a large iron gate. One of the men is around Jabiru's age and looks vaguely familiar. The other, older, short and stocky, reminds Jabiru of the timber-getters he'd met with Shorty. The gate is heavy and the men are struggling.

Couldn't bear a hand couldya mate, the older man says.

With Jabirus help they get the gate in place. Jabiru turns to go but the younger man stops him.

Don't suppose you'd like some work would you, he says. Could do with some help.

There are times like this, as it was meeting with Flannigan and the German, when it seems to Jabiru that there are white people who don't take too much account of skin colour, or if they do, don't care; times when other imperatives take precedence over pettier considerations of race. In the lonely isolation of Flannigan's run Jabiru was at first simply a hired hand. But there were times, sitting round the fire after a days work, when he and Flannigan would swap stories about their day or, on rare occasions, and then briefly, about their past. At such times they were just two men sharing their lives. To the German Jabiru was someone to be converted to his church,

if not to his race. Before then had been the lime works, and after the work on the wharves and the girls at Madam May's. It was all very confusing.

Come on, the older man adds when Jabiru does not respond, You're a strong looking bloke. How about it? Like the boss said, we could do with some help. Full board. Place to sleep....

Jabiru likes the way the older man speaks. The voice is rough and the ends of words seem bitten off but he speaks directly to Jabiru as if he really doesn't see his colour. Or if he does it doesn't matter. The younger man, for his part, exudes a friendly openness that Jabiru finds reassuring. But there is something else; Jabiru is sure he's seen the younger man before, but can't figure where or in what circumstances.

Jabiru says in a soft and uncertain voice that, yes, maybe he'd like some work.

Excellent! says the younger man. Come, I'll introduce you to The Pine.

By the way, the young white man adds as they walk along a well-worn path towards a group of small buildings, I'm Bolan. James Bolan. And this, he says, indicating the older man, is Sid Reilly. Sid's strong as an ox.

On that newly beaten track the three men stop and shake hands.

And what's your name? Sid asks brusquely.

Jacky, Jabiru says after a pause. Call me Jacky. Others do.

Good O, says James Bolan. Welcome to The Pine, Jacky.

Jabiru shares rough accommodation with Sid and two blacks going by the names of King and Billy. King, who is tall and thickset, says he's from up north but is no more specific than that. Billy, who is short and wiry, says he's from the Great Sandy region, which is coastal country, and that his people are still there and that he'll go back one day.

The Pine is like a combination of Flannigan's run and Otto's farm, being a mix of wide open spaces where cattle graze and cultivated areas of small crops and fruit trees. Jabiru works hard. He likes the feel of the breeze blowing the sweat from his skin. He shares a sense of achievement as the farm develop into a viable operation. The mild winter passes and the long slow build up to summer begins.

Storm clouds gather over the far ranges, presaging the wet season, but the additions to the wooden building that James Bolan calls the Homestead have been finished, as have the wattle and mud worker's quarters, the barn and cattle yards.

The four workers - Sid, Jabiru, King and Billy – are standing by the yards surveying the results of their work.

Like a small village isn't it, says Sid with a sweep of his arm.

Pillage, says Billy.

And King laughs.

Jabiru, in his awkward way, asks Sid if he plans to get his own place.

Sid tells a long story about how he'd come as a convict from England and how he'd suffered at the hands of the soldiers and how, after the end of Transportation he'd been pardoned and offered land but that he was not a land-owning sort of person and so was happy to work under someone as good as Bolan who'd taken him on.

I've the tools for the hard work, he says, showing his mighty hands, but not the brains for the running of places such as this.

It is the most Sid has revealed about himself in Jabiru's company. Jabiru warms even more to the nuggetty ex-convict who, it seems, is as much an outsider as Jabiru. From this day there develops between the two men a bond that goes deeper than words.

Off days Jabiru sometimes goes hunting with Sid, King and Billy. They roam beyond the boundaries of The Pine, sometimes heading west towards the far escarpment of the main range, crossing country Jabiru is familiar with from his time with Geebung and Jamboor. One day they travel further than usual and find themselves before the greatest of the volcanic plug that rise out of the plains. Many times Jabiru had seen them during his travels with Geebung and Jamboor, but he'd never been this close.

Tibberawaccum, Billy says, pointing to the nearest mountain. Old man mountain. See his face.

They look up. The top of the mountain is indeed a face: stern with shadowed eyes. Jabiru is reminded of the old man.

Tibberawaccum is guarding the country, Billy adds.

They call them the glasshouses, Sid says. Named by Captain Cook, so I'm told, because they look like the glasshouses of the old country. Buggered if I know what a glasshouse is. Never seen one.

Billy snorts, interrupting Sid, says in his particular brand of broken English, Mister Cook, him never discover nothing, everything already here from long ago.

You're right Billy, says Sid. Us whites ain't discovered anything.

Other times, when it's just the three black men out in uncleared country where there are no fences they pretend that the world is what it was before the coming of the white men. But they know that it is only pretence, for their weapons, fashioned during spare time and without the knowledge the elders might have imparted, are almost useless against the wild game that appear. And so on most occasions they go back to The Pine dispirited.

It's a dark night, and cold. Jabiru, Sid, King and Billy are sitting by a roaring fire. The night draws on. No one cares. They are happy in each other's company, pouring billy tea and sipping from hot tin cups. What conversation there is, between long bouts of silence, turns on such weighty matters as the weather and the quality of the tea. It's often like this when they are tired after a hard day's work; the four of them just sitting. King and Billy don't speak much in the way of English, and when they do it's in a way that's difficult for Jabiru or Sid to understand. Still, there's companionship and, as Sid says, who needs talk anyway. But this night Sid, who's usually quiet, tells a long story about his convict days; about a fellow convict who'd escaped from the chains and lived with the blacks up north for years and that when he eventually returned to Brisbane town he was neither black nor white and for a time there couldn't fit in and how he went a little strange, wandering about the town like a silent ghost and even when transportation stopped and most of the soldiers went away and the people were free this man continued to haunt the streets and might still be for all Sid knew.

There's others like him, Sid adds, that are lost and I might have been too if I hadn't of been taken in by someone as good as James Bolan.

King raises his metal cup and sips loudly. It's a kind of toast. Leastwise that's how Sid takes it.

The four men work well together. They do what's needed to be done, with little direction from the boss who is often away on business, or in the house doing what Sid calls paperwork. Few words need to be spoken, for each knows his job. It feels at times that The Pine is as much their place as it is Bolan's.

The men are standing by the cattle pens, watching James Bolan ride away, dressed in his finest clothes. He'd told them he'd be gone for some time and that Sid would be in charge. They stand watching the rider disappear.

There'll be changes to be sure, says the sardonic Sid.

Weeks pass and there's no sign of the boss. There's little to do and the men are bored. King and Billy talk of leaving, of going home. Sid seems discontented. They are in the yard, leaning on a fence rail gazing absently at the sheep within the pen. Sid says they need shearing but the boss isn't around to give the order and he's reluctant to take the initiative. It's been like this for the past week, Sid morose and unable, or unwilling, to take initiative.

Might as well put a billy on, says Sid.

They are sloping towards the fireplace where the billycan sits waiting when they notice a cloud of dust from the direction of the main gate. The men watch the dust cloud come closer. It's James Bolan, returning in what looks like a new buggy. He is not alone. Sitting either side of James Bolan are two fancy-hatted women. The men stand watching as James Bolan pulls the buggy up before the homestead and helps the women down. They continue to watch as James Bolan and the women cross the yard, climb the steps and stand at the edge of the veranda looking out over the run. James waves the men over. They stand at the foot of the steps looking up expectantly.

This, James Bolan says, holding the hand of a tall thin young woman standing to his right, is my wife, Eliza.

And this, he adds, indicating a smaller woman standing slightly behind and to his left, is Molly Doolan. Molly is our new cook and housemaid.

James Bolan introduces the men to the women, starting with the nuggetty Sid and ending with the man he knows as Jacky. The men shift uneasily on the dirt. This they had not anticipated.

Later that evening, after the first meal cooked by the woman called Molly Doolan has been eaten and she has gone back inside the main house the four labouring men sit round the fire in silence.

Sid clears his throat and says gruffly, She'll change the balance of the place that fancy hatted woman. And that Molly Doolan... I'll bet her cookins no bedderin mine. Truth of the matter...

King clears his throat, spits into the fire. Me and Billy... we goin back to our own country, he mumbles in a low voice.

Sid pulls a sarcastic face. Nothin left of your country so what's there to go back to?

It'll always be our country, King says emphatically, No matter what them white people bin thinkin.

Pfff, huffs Sid, youse are better orf here anyhow...

Jabiru senses that beneath the sarcasm Sid is bitterly disappointed. King and Billy are his mates. They work well together and enjoy each other's company. But Jabiru knows that the black men will not be stopped. He knows how strong the call of home can be. Has he not wanted, so often, to go back to his island home?

King and Billy leave early the next morning. Jabiru and Sid watch the two black men walk down the path and through the gate.

Silly buggers, Sid mutters under his breath.

But there are tears in the old convict's eyes.

It's Sunday and Jabiru is on the riverbank, gazing distractedly out over the river to the line of blue hills away to the north. The sun shines warm and the breeze blows soft off the water. He's happy to be alone with his thoughts. Which, perhaps

because of the sun and the gentle breeze, will not settle on any one thing. He leans back, feeling the warm sand on his back, drifts into a light sleep.

Hello Jacky. Mind if I join you?

Jabiru sits bolt upright. James Bolan is standing beside him.

Sorry to startle you Jacky, James Bolan says and sits down beside Jabiru.

Great spot isn't it. Thought I'd try a spot of fishing.

James Bolan begins to unpack his fishing gear

Jabiru is struck by Bolan's easy confidence and by the fact that, up close, he seems so young. How can someone so young act as if the world is his. This thought is both a wonder and an annoyance to Jabiru. But what troubles Jabiru most is the conviction that he's seen the man before. For the life of him, he cannot remember where.

James Bolan assembles his fishing gear slowly, as if there is all the time in the world. I have some extra gear Jacky, he says, if you'd like to try your hand.

They sit in silence, their lines slack. The afternoon wears slowly on. They drift into a pleasant torpor. Jabiru's thoughts turn slowly, musing on the nature of life and the relationship between men. He wonders how it happened, how the white people had managed to take such absolute possession of the country and how his people no longer had power over the way in which the world was ordered. He wonders about the old man who led him to the bora and all the knowledge he possessed.

Where are you, old man, who left me at the bora?

Jabiru wonders what became of the old man. All is changed. He wonders why it is that he cannot bring himself to call the man who now sits beside him by his first name while meekly accepting the false name Jacky. He begins to consider whether or not to correct the name he'd given James Bolan. Why, he asks himself, hadn't he told James Bolan and Sid his proper name. He is proud of the name given to him at the bora. But these thoughts fade as the day draws on. They fish without success. The question of his name will not go away. Jabiru becomes increasingly agitated.

Unable to contain himself longer he blurts out his name.

James Bolan turns to Jabiru in surprise.

What was that Jacky, he asks. I didn't quite catch it.

My name Mr Bolan... It is Jabiru.

James Bolan looks at the black man beside him then turns his gaze out over the river. For ages neither speaks. The whole world is hushed. A fish breaks the surface. An Egret flies up from the opposite bank. James Bolan fumbles with his fishing gear, turns to the black man beside him.

Jabiru, he says softly! Did you say your name is Jabiru?

Jabiru nods.

What a grand name, the white man says. Beats James. What does it mean?

Jabiru is a bird.

I've never heard of a Jabiru. What are they like?

Big. Long legs. Large beak. Very tall. Black and white.

Like a stork, James Bolan suggests, that brings the babies.

Don't know Mr Bolan. Don't know Stork. Maybe. Sometimes, when the weather is right, they come down from the north. I have only seen one. That was a long time ago...

Jabiru recalls the moment he'd pointed the bird out to the old man and how the old man had looked at him for a long moment before calling its name. Jabiru did not know then but looking back it must have been then that his name had been decided.

Jabiru tells the white man sitting quietly beside him how he got his name, and, briefly, the story of the bora.

Then, thinking he has said too much, is silent.

James Bolan, who has been gazing abstractedly out over the water lost in thought, turns to his companion, a look almost of awe on his face. Jabiru sees the way his boss is looking at him. The look reminds Jabiru of the look he would sometimes visit upon the old man. He is embarrassed by this but at the same time flattered. No white man has looked at him like this. This man Bolan, Jabiru realises, is open to the

world, and to other people. Jabiru shifts his gaze to the river. Way out there he sees, as if in a mist, the distant hills. They are blue and far away.

Sorry about that, James Bolan says after a while. I mean the Jacky thing. Shall I call you Jabiru?

Jabiru regrets what he's done. Jabiru is the name he'd been given by the elders. It is special. He could never call the white man by his first name, even if he was asked to.

Call me Jacky, Mister Bolan, like the others do. But maybe remember my name.

Good O! A secret then!

James Bolan looks out across the river at the great arc of country stretching away to the distant hills. He has title to a good deal of this land but he wonders if it really is his country.

Jabiru, sitting beside him, is a man who owns nothing.

Funny, he says, more to himself than to Jabiru, the way things turn out. I was born on the boat coming over from England. Can't remember anything of that. My earliest memory was of a line of convicts in chains trudging past our house on the river. Misshapen people with toothless mouths and crooked gaits. They frightened me. They seemed so bent, so hard, so bitter. I was sure they would eat me if they could. I remember the soldiers too. They were also bitter-looking men, bigger than the convicts, but little better. Rude men mostly, full of hatred and constantly mouthing oaths that were banned in our household. My mother was frightened of them; convicts and soldiers. She would always tell me to be careful of the evil men. She was lonely, my mother. Almost everyone, apart from my family and a few officials and their families, was either a soldier or a convict. My father was one of the few non-military officials. My mother used to complain about the town. Called it a hellhole. She said that one night at dinner. My father got angry, turned to me and said, out of your mother's so-called hellhole, James, will come a great city. When transportation stopped most of the convicts and soldiers left. Some stayed and were given grants of land. Others, like Sid, found employment. My father said that there

was a bright future for the place. Maybe he was right. I am lucky. I have this property. Life is good. Most of the time.

James Bolan yanks his line. Nothing! He lets it go slack.

Thought I had a bite, he says.

Jabiru says nothing.

We lived in a small house, James Bolan continues, not far from the wharves and the swinging basin. I'd spend whole days alone watching the ships come and go, or fishing in the creek that ran up towards the windmill, or walking the streets, or watching the buildings going up. Sometimes I'd go past the old convict barracks and the women's factory. From within those intimidating stone walls I'd hear the cries of flogged and beaten men. I remember the convicts working in chains under the hot sun. I could smell them from the distance my father demanded that I keep. That terrible convict smell! Even after the last of the convicts went, or were freed, I'd see labouring men and women badly treated, used like animals. I'd see their bitter faces in dreams.

Bolan pauses, turns and looks out over the water. He's not seeing much. His mind is whirling. He needs to tell his story. There is something about this black man called Jabiru that he likes. He'd felt friendship with black people before as a child when, with no white boys his age to play with, he'd go over to Yorks Hollow and play with the black children. This was against his mother's wishes but she never stopped him. There was one boy he especially liked. Perhaps it was mateship. Mateship was a word he heard often enough but he wasn't sure what it meant.

He turns back to Jabiru, says, I'd see your people Jabiru, huddled in pathetic little knots under trees or in front of public buildings, sitting with torn blankets over their hunched shoulders, wearing the dirtiest clothes I'd ever seen. Pitiful creatures my mother called them. They'd beg for food. I'd see strong young black men paraded past in chains. My mother complained to my father but he said there was nothing we could do. But, as I said, I got to know some of the children. Used to play with them. They were terrific fun. Some of the people we knew disapproved but my mother

tolerated it. I guess she understood there was no one else. We would go fishing and crabbing along the river. Me and the black kids. I learnt some of the language. Mianjin ngatta yarrana. That's what they'd say to me at Yorks Hollow. I'm going to Brisbane. Mianjin. Such a lovely name, the way they'd say it: mee an yin. Meandering like the river. We Europeans should have stuck with that name. What does Brisbane mean anyway? I loved the stories the black people told. Eventually my father found out I was going there and warned me off. I never went back. By then it was too late anyway. The children had been taken away with the rest; sent to missions...

James Bolan pauses, looks at Jabiru. He doesn't know if the black man is listening or merely being polite.

I helped my father in his business for a while, James Bolan continues. Then he got this place and told me it was mine. That was it! Then I met Eliza. Her family were Schulzes. German refugees, brought out by the German missionaries at Zions Hill. They call it Nunda now. I love her. Eliza. But I'm not sure that she's all that happy here. You mustn't mind her Jabiru. She means well, even if she is sometimes a little sharp.

James Bolan stops talking. The two young men sit on the riverbank, their lines slack. After a long silence Jabiru asks about Molly the maid.

Molly! Well she is something else. My mother rescued her from a horrible man called Piper, who ...

Piper!

James Bolan is surprised by Jabiru's startled exclamation, and the brief look of fear that seems to pass across the black man's face.

Why, he asks, did you know Piper?

Jabiru shakes his head.

Anyway, James Bolan continues, Reginald Piper was a sort of friend of my father's. His son Charles was killed by some black people up Kilcoy way. Shortly after that Reginald Piper and his wife went back to England and Molly Doolan fell into begging. My mother found her on the street one day. My mother ran a school and

took Molly on as an assistant. When I married Eliza my mother suggested Molly come here to help out. She is good for Eliza. Company when I'm away. She is from Ireland...

Jabiru, half listening, stares out across the water. The sun beats down, forming surface patterns that play hypnotically. He vaguely wonders about his own mother and his people on the island. There is so much he wants to ask James Bolan, so much he doesn't understand. He is drifting into morbid thoughts when his line goes taut and whips away.

James Bolan shouts in triumph, Play him Jabiru. Play him. Don't lose him!

Jabiru lands the fish. The catch precipitates a flurry of catches by both men. With the sun sinking below the western hills and their bucket full of fish they gather their things and walk back to the homestead.

Eliza Bolan is standing on the veranda watching them coming across the paddock. She watches her husband shake the black mans hand, rather too fondly for her liking, watches as the black man goes to his rough quarters and James Bolan goes over to the yards, presumably to inspect the sheep. She retreats inside before her husband can see that she's been watching. She tells herself that she will never get used to this life.

Why, she asks her husband over dinner that night, are you so friendly with that black man.

As soon as she's said it she is sorry, but she can contain herself no longer. All the frustrations of life in that remote place, the lack of human contact of her kind and her husband's obsession with the workings of The Pine, frustrations built up over months, comes to a head. Seated at the table in the dining room of the homestead he'd built for her, she waits with trepidation for her husbands response.

Because, James Bolan responds, clearly annoyed, he is a good worker. And I like him. Anyway, I couldn't manage alone. They are people, Elisa. Just like us. We have taken their land.

Eliza Bolan cannot counter these responses. Whenever she sees James and the black man called Jacky working together, enjoying each others company, she feels

aggrieved. She wonders if her antagonism towards their friendship is because of the colour of the other man's skin or whether it's deeper than that. She would like to point out to her husband that she is a refugee without family and also in need of support. But she struggles with herself when this happens, telling herself that she is being selfish.

She tries to accept her husband for what he is; thankful that he is a little more considerate than most of the men she's had had contact with in the past. But there is a barrier, one she cannot break down. And so she carries a mixture of self-pity and aloofness. This is her burden. She wishes she could be more open to the world she finds herself in; wishes that she could embrace the man who is her husband with fondness and not just through the occasional violent lovemaking she knows to be over compensation for her inability to respond to his simpler everyday needs.

Depression sometimes comes upon Eliza Bolan as suddenly as a summer storm. It is worse during the long and sweaty summer days, days when even the cows wait sullenly for the cool of the evening and the cicadas call incessantly as if cursing the people who have cut down so much of their forest. As if that is not enough, hot days suddenly go dark and the temperature plunges and hail the size of golf balls wipes out vegetable patches and the fruit not already destroyed by bats, possums, rats and birds.

In the short time she has been on The Pine she has seen the effects of weather. In the first winter on The Pine a sudden frost reaped havoc on crops just right for picking. Then the young peach trees, fooled by the brief cold nights of July and August, fretted at the first onset of October's humidity and gave their fruit over to moths. And then, in December, the river, which provided water for the run, flooded and the water, over a mile wide, covered everything of value.

The land and the waters and the sky were never still, were always uncertain. Sometimes, it seemed to Eliza Bolan, nature was perverse as she was.

With his wife so often remote, and without other company of his own age, James Bolan is drawn to Jabiru. He sees in the young black man certain qualities that he might emulate; like resilience and patience and the ability to take on the trials and

tribulations of a deceitful world without rancour. Jabiru does not seem to hold grudges the way so many of James' European acquaintances do. This worldly acceptance of fate is inspirational to James Bolan, who sees it as the only way of dealing with the unpredictable nature of that country, not to mention the unpredictable nature of his wife. Jabiru, he feels, is vital to the run.

It's dark. Sid and Jabiru are sitting round the fire sipping billy tea, as they often do after a hard day. There's not much to say and they miss the company of King and Billy. Molly Doolan comes over and sits with them. She has never done this before. The three sit in silence. Molly pokes at the fire. Sid asks her if she'd like a cuppa. She says she would, that she's had a hard day.

What sort of hard, asks Sid.

Oh, that mistress! Exclaims Molly.

Giving you a hard time Molly, says Sid.

She's up and down, says Molly. Never can tell what her mood will be. I don't know how much more I can take.

Treats you bad, asks Sid.

Well, not bad. Not hitting and all that... Not like them Pipers. They was violent and awful. Least the men was. That Reginald and his son Charles; real savage they was. That Charles... to him I was less than human. Called me an Irish whore. Which I aint and never was.

Sid and Jabiru sit in silence. They've never heard Molly talk so much. Such is the strength of her feeling and such is the power of her oration that they are mightily impressed. Then she stops and sinks back into herself. She has said too much, she knows.

Molly, says Sid, breaking the embarrassing silence, I takes your meanin. You're a strong young woman. Don't let them back there forgit it.

And having said this he too shrinks back into himself.

All is quiet around the fire.

Emboldened by Sid's empathy Molly continues.

I heard about the death of that Charles Piper and I was not sorry. Serves him right, for he was a savage man who mistreated everyone.

Molly Doolan begins to shake. She is crying. Sid puts his arm around her shoulders. They sit, the two of them: the tough old ex-convict and the young ex-convict. Jabiru stares into the fire. He sees nothing but red flames. Blood. It will never go away.

Jabiru rides out with James Bolan to round up some stock for the yards. He's thinking of Flannigan and wondering if one day something will happen like that which happened out there on Flannigan's run; something unexpected that will drive him from The Pine. He thinks of home, of the island and his old mother who waits back there and he knows that one day he will go from The Pine.

There's a place on the river, just beyond the tide's last reach, where a small rapid divides the tidal water from the fresh water that flows down from the western mountains. Here, at the base of a steep bank on the southern shore is a drift of fine sand. The bank sweeps round to the northwest, protecting the little beach from the sou' westerly winds that sometimes blow cold and unimpeded from the high country. Jabiru goes there sometimes to be alone.

On this day there is only a slight breeze. The sand below the bank is warm. The water shimmers in the northern light. Jabiru is lying naked on the sand, feeling the soft air draw the sweat from his still-young body. He drifts into a half sleep. Out of which he is woken by the sound of splashing water. He sits up, sees the maid Molly Doolan standing in the river. For a long time he watches her gently circling in the shallow water near the bank.

Molly Doolan comes in closer to the bank and stands. She sees the black man Jacky lying naked on the sand.

Oh, Jacky, she calls, one hand across her face.

It's early afternoon, the air fresh, the sun warm and the sand hot. Jabiru stands. They are ten paces apart, Molly in the cool water in her white under clothes, he naked on the warm sand. They have spoken many times, always briefly, and have shared many quiet moments after evening means. She calls him Jacky in her lilting

Irish way and he calls her Queen Molly because that is what Sid calls her because of the way she strides about the kitchen giving orders.

He knows that he could never approach her in any way that would intimidate her or lead to any suggestion of desire on his part. To do so would be fatal, even under Bolan's relatively liberal management. Yet, despite the hardness in her manner, he has often felt drawn to her.

Molly Doolan, despite everything she'd been taught, despite all the unwritten laws forbidding intimate contact between classes and races, finds the black man strangely attractive. He is young – about her age she guessed – and strong. She would watch him at work, shirtless. She'd see the savage-looking welts across his back and shoulders. She had asked Sid about them one night. He'd said they were signs of manhood. Molly Doolan had been hardened by life, but she was still a young woman and had women's yearnings. She would often dream of a different life, of a husband and family, of her own farm. Sometimes her thoughts were more vulgar and she would indulge these despite the guilt imposed by her religion. Jabiru was young and strong, his body was beautiful and he smiled a lovely smile.

They stand by the river, neither knowing what to do. Molly Doolan with her Irish Catholic background and Jabiru with his bewilderment at white people's ways. Molly, despite everything, surprises herself by smiling. Jabiru goes to her and stands beside her in the river. He is fascinated by the soft whiteness of her body. On Bolan's run she could seem sour and hard, as if the world was against her. But this afternoon in the river she is soft and gentle. Standing beside her, smitten by the tenderness of her skin, he feels strong and alive. To hide his growing desire he swims out to the middle of the river. The water is cold. His body temperature falls. He turns and faces the shore, dog-paddling in the deep water. She is still there, in the same place, close to the shore. She laughs, calls for him to come back. He swims to her and stands close by her. She holds his hand there in the river and he feels strong and hard against her. She tells him that he is a good swimmer but that swimming is something she never learnt. He says he will teach her but she takes her hand from his and with her finger traces the outline of his scars. He looks down at the smallness of her and she looks up

at him and smiles a strange smile and he picks her up in his arms and carries her from the river and on that riverbank he takes her and she takes him.

And Jabiru, the black man they call Jacky, makes love to Molly Doolan, the white maid of The Pine they call Queen Molly.

The sun goes down. The afternoon cools to evening. Molly Doolan dresses in her still-wet clothes and leaves. She does not look back. Jabiru cannot move. He thinks about what he has done and wonders what the consequences will be. He stands there as night falls and the river is a silver ribbon in the darkening land. Then he goes back to his quarters to face Sid's questioning look.

Days pass. Eliza comments to her husband that Molly seems to have lost a little of the bitterness she once carried. James says he hadn't noticed but when he does look he sees that the drawn hardness of her features seem to have softened and that there is rosiness about her cheeks that wasn't there before.

It's early summer. Each humid day passes much as the one before; sticky morning giving way to darkening rain clouds that don't fulfil their promise, leaving everyone frustrated. For weeks it's been like this. There's a mute sullenness across the land. The anticipation of rain turning to frustrated acceptance of nature's perversity as the rain does not come.

If only it would rain, wails Eliza Bolan to herself.

Weeks pass. This day they are all out in the yard – James, Eliza, Molly, Jabiru and Sid – looking at the cumulus storm clouds building over the ranges. The clouds grow ever thicker. The sky grows dark, turning from dark blue-grey to an eerie dark green. In this light there is no glare. The whole visible world is hard-edged against the green black sky and even individual leaves stand out in distant trees.

There'll be hail, Sid says to no one in particular. We'd better finish fixin this bloody fence and get inside. They go from the yard; James, Eliza and Molly to the house, Sid and Jabiru to the shed. Lightning bolts strike across the northern sky. Thunder claps roll away. The green sky turns to grey and hail comes down in blocks of ice the size and weight of stones. They smash upon the earth and upon all growing things. Sid and Jabiru stare out at the storm from the shed. James, Eliza and Molly

stand at the front door of the homestead looking out at the drama being played out. Molly Doolan is on her bed. She is crying.

The hail stops. Hard rain comes sheeting down, melting the hail and covering the ground around the homestead until it is a sodden lake. Out in the paddocks cows huddle together under what shelter they can find. The two farm dogs whine and whimper in their kennels. Until the storm passes and the late sun breaks through the clouds along the tops of the western ranges and Sid laughs to hide his awe and James Bolan says they'll have to replant the vegetables.

Molly Doolan, risen from her bed, is standing by the washtub, propping her heavy body against its side, one hand holding her stomach, the other holding the tub. She leans over and retches, then stands against the tub breathing deep breaths, trying to maintain her balance. She wishes she were dead.

Mother Mary, she says to herself, help me. Oh Holy Mother Mary.

Eliza Bolan is at the laundry door looking at her maid. Molly Doolan casts her eyes down. She is shamed, she knows.

Oh Molly, what have we done?

We? Had Eliza Bolan said 'we'? What, Molly Doolan wonders, could she mean by this?' Mary looks to her employer and sees that she is smiling. This adds to her perplexity. Is she offering something? Could she, usually so indifferent and distant, be capable of offering womanly support to her maid? Molly Doolan, fighting fatigue and nausea, cannot understand the other woman's intentions.

Oh, Molly...

It sounds like a plea. Molly Doolan looks up at the other woman and, for a moment, their eyes meet. Molly sees a different Eliza. Her look is no longer hard, could almost be sympathetic. Then Molly Doolan realises: Eliza Bolan is pregnant too. Molly grimaces. Eliza smiles. Molly Doolan has never seen her like this. She is, Molly realises, beautiful. Eliza Bolan sees in Molly Doolan's worn features a pleasant bloom and is momentarily happy for her. Suddenly they are in each other's arms, laughing and crying together there in the laundry of The Pine, alone with each other.

James Bolan returns this day from the far paddock and is greeted by a beaming Eliza. They hug. Eliza clings. James is both pleased and perplexed.

Why so happy, he asks.

And Eliza tells him the news.

Eliza, it seems, has been transformed. James looks at her. She is beautiful. James Bolan is to be a father, the husband of a happy wife who has been blessed. He had been eager to discuss his business dealings in town, which had been successful, but they now seem of minor concern. He wants to tell the world, to race back to town to tell his parents, who will be overjoyed. Between considerate enquiries as to Eliza's health and babblings about the changes needed to accommodate this fortuitous event his mind races.

Over a glass of port after dinner, after they have exhausted the subject of their mutual joy, Eliza tells James about Molly.

I suspect Jacky is the father, she adds.

Oh, says James.

Then, after a long pause, he says quietly, as if to himself, Jacky!

And goes quiet.

What is it, enquires Eliza. Why so suddenly quiet?

Oh it's...you know...I like the man. Should have told you before, didn't know how to...

What, asks Eliza.

James is about to tell Eliza Jacky's real name but he stops himself; it was, and should remain, a secret between them. He feels guilty, both for almost telling the secret and for hiding it from his wife.

Eliza Bolan looks at her husband. She is annoyed that he, her husband, has such a close relationship with that man who is the cause of Molly Doolan's problems. And problems there will be, for it is unheard of for a black man to father a child by a white woman. But her own inner happiness is such that she is for the moment beyond petty jealousy.

Poor Molly, she says.

Poor Jabiru, James adds after a long pause.

Poor who? exclaims Eliza.

Jacky, says James Bolan. Poor Jacky!

I thought, says Eliza, that you said another name.

Oh, no, says James. Just Jacky.

Eliza Bolan looks to her husband but the moment passes.

Molly is so happy, she says softly. And yet I am afraid she cannot keep the child.

That, says James after along pause, is a great pity.

Molly Doolan, unaware of the private discussions concerning her and her child, sees herself as blessed. The Lord, she tells herself, has intervened, given her something to love. Eliza Bolan sees her maid's happiness and in the privacy of her room prays for her.

Jabiru is concerned that, since that day at the river Molly Doolan has been avoiding him. Yet she seems lighter, more at ease with the world; seems to have lost the bitterness she once carried. The drawn hardness of her features has changed too and there is a rosy colouring in her cheeks. Molly's refusal to acknowledge him is inexplicable until Sid informs Jabiru of her condition. Jabiru is young. His experience of women prior to that day on the river with Molly Doolan had been limited to the girls at Madam May's. That day by the river with her was special and he would have liked to share his joy with someone, even Sid, but he has held back.

Now he's facing his friend Sid and Sid's not looking terribly sympathetic.

I knowed somethin was up, Sid says. That day you come back late from the river. I knowed you was up to somethin. Now you've done it boy. You've done and messed up. Fatherin the baby of a white woman...

Sid stops. Jabiru, he sees, is clearly perplexed, and maybe more than a little fearful. He places his hands on Jabiru's shoulders. It'll be alright, he says in fatherly fashion. It'll be alright lad. But...

Sid cannot finish the sentence. All he knows is that the world of The Pine has changed forever.

For Jabiru the world changed that day. Molly, clearly pregnant, keeps her distance. Eliza, also pregnant, is seldom seen. He hardly sees James Bolan, who is often away. Sid has his own troubles and sometimes goes for days without speaking. For a while there Jabiru had thought he was part of the place, that he belonged, but he comes to realise, as the days go by and Molly keeps her distance, that he never will be part of the white world. Once again he is struck by the way he has become an outsider in his own land.

It's evening in the town. Georgina Bolan is at her writing desk. Her husband Andrew is upriver somewhere supervising some new venture to do with coal. Her son James is busy at The Pine. Her daughter Kate is in her room. The house seems empty and cold. Her journal is open before her. And yet she sits, as she so often does before each entry, staring out at the night.

She takes a deep breath, dips her pen and begins.

5 June 1845

A few days ago, on the way home after school, I passed a begging woman. It wasn't until later that I realised who it was. It was Molly Doolan, James' maid. I went back the next day but could not find her.

It has been such a sad affair. The children were born within days of each other. Andrew is small and fine-looking and possibly takes after Eliza. Molly's child Jack (James insisted on naming him Jack for some reason) is a dark, sturdy child and quite pretty. He has been registered as Jack Doolan, mother Molly Doolan, father unknown. All are doing well.

I do not know the whole story, but Jacky, who is the father, left suddenly and without a word. Apparently Jacky became more and more morose (James says he knew the child was his, although he never said anything). The last time we visited I saw Jacky out in the yards. He seemed a fine figure of a man, though terribly

unhappy. James doesn't quite know what to do. They had become such good companions.

Just before the children's first birthdays Molly left The Pine. She told Eliza that she was going to town. She never returned. It appears that Eliza became quite possessive of Molly's child, even insisting that he be brought up as part of her family and making it known that Molly was in no position to give the child the upbringing he deserved. James also believes that Eliza saw the boy as a companion to young Andrew. Eliza insisted that she was acting in the child's interests. Molly at first accepted the situation but as Eliza became more and more possessive Molly grew more and more depressed. Then she left. No one knew where she'd gone and no one had heard from her. Since seeing her I have made enquiries as to her whereabouts, but to no avail. I shall let James know that I saw her of course.

The two children were doing well. Young Andrew is rather small for his age and is, of course, Eliza's favourite. Jack is dark-skinned and, I have to say, beautiful. Eliza says James dotes more on Jack than on his own child, which upsets her. The children are good for each other and it is nice to see them playing together, even though they are already so different in character.

The past year has gone quickly, all in all. Andrew is busy with his various interests (he is away at the moment upstream, something to do with a new coal deposit at Ipswich). James and Eliza and the children seem happy out at The Pine but it worries me that they are so far away. Kate is growing fast. She hardly sees her older brother, which I think is a pity. There are so many years between them I sometimes wonder if they will ever really know each other. I am pleased for Kate that transportation has stopped. The convicts used to frighten her. Now most of them have gone, and with them most of the soldiers. Those who remain have either taken up land or employment of one sort or another. There was talk of disbanding the settlement but that hadn't happen. It does seem that Andrew's predictions of a bright future for the place may come true now that the place is a free settlement. New people are coming

in all the time. In place of the desperation that had prevailed there is a sense of optimism

I have started a school. It is very much needed here. At first I was unsure of my capacity to teach but it is going well. The parents seem thankful, although sometimes I think they are more grateful for the relief from their children than the teaching it provides. There are a few more families here now and, through the school, I am meeting some of the newer women. There are so many men and so few of us. Life is not easy for women here. We have to be strong. A few of us are thinking of forming a reading group and, perhaps, a musical society. This is such a raw place, with no culture to speak of. Andrew, of course, doesn't care. He has his projects and when he is home is so tired that he can hardly make it through the dinner without dropping off. I sometimes ask him about his day but he never says much. He rarely asks about my day, or about the school, although he has put money into it.

Brisbane (we no longer call it Moreton Bay) is growing in fits and starts. From my window I see the ships coming and going. Earlier today I saw the Sovereign pass by, heading downstream, no doubt full of wool bound for the old country (it has been a good year for the graziers I'm told). On seeing that ship my spirits rose. It seemed a symbol of the colony's prosperity, which I hope will continue. This is not a pleasant place when there is downturn in trade. Last time it happened many men found work hard to get, especially the wharf labourers and ex-convicts. I'd see them hanging about riverside streets in drunken stupors. I pitied them but found them confronting. It seems there are men who are at the beck and call of others and when they are not needed they fall into bad ways. At such times I am reminded of the bad days of the convicts. But I am sure, as Andrew is, that it is only a passing phase.

I look up from my reading. Mary is crying. It's not the cancer; I can see that. It's something else. I ask what's the matter.

She chokes back sobs, looks at me, opens her mouth to say something then closes it.

Once again I have the feeling that she is trying to tell me something.

I look at my watch. It's late.

Got something on Will?

I laugh, tell her I have an important date with my bar fridge.

See you then Will.

It's sad the way she says that.

I go home and stand in front of the open fridge, staring into the racks and seeing nothing. For a long time I stand, wondering what the hell I'm doing. I snap out of it, grab a bottle of wine, pour a glass and sit at the kitchen table sipping wine and thinking back. I'm doing a lot of that lately. I think of London. Thirty years! Hard to believe it's thirty years since my return from London. Even now I wonder if I'd made the right decision.

Why, I'd asked myself, as I boarded the plane for the return flight, was I returning to the place I swore I'd left for good. I had plenty of time to contemplate this question during those countless hours in the cramped cabins of planes and depressing transit terminals. After landing I'd sat for what seemed ages in my window seat waiting for the other passengers to disembark, looking out the window at the usual airport tarmac activity and wondering again if I'd made the right decision.

The plane emptied. I rose and walked into the terminal. The first thing I noticed on entering the building were the Queenslanders. They stood out from the better-dressed travellers and businessmen in their cheap shorts and thongs and cotton dresses, looking like they'd just come from some backyard chore. They looked like remnants from a vanishing tribe. It was a shock to see them, those men and women who could have been my own aunts, uncles, brothers, sisters with their weather-worn faces and their darting movements and their lack of confidence. I'd found myself staring much too hard at the fag end of generations of Anglo-Irish bitterness. Old hatreds and sufferings etched into faces, decades of toil evident in emaciated and sun-blotched bodies. They never used to dress that badly at airports. Airports were special, even if, in the case of Eagle Farm airport, the terminal buildings were converted US Airforce hangars. People would at least go to the trouble of putting on a pair of slacks and a decent shirt. Not flop about in dirty shorts and shirts barely

covering huge beer bellies, great twisted and gnarled toes poking out of rubber thongs.

I'm a fucking snob, I told myself. But I was angry at these people with their 'who gives a shit' mentality and their readiness to take offence. Which in fact one big bloke did, hissing fuck off mate as I accidentally bumped into him. All the bitterness I'd felt towards those people before I left returned. I remember my mother's striving after some sort of dignity, a striving she gave up on in the end. And that early photo of my father dressed nattily in a striped sports coat. It wasn't a studio photo, just a snapshot taken outside the gates of the Botanical Gardens, but he looked dapper. It was the same with my mother; there were pictures of her in fancy hats and flowing dresses. Ordinary people dressed well back then. But in later photos they'd given in, become lazy in their dress. It was as if it had all been too much and they'd given in to the torpor of Brisbane life. And it was all there in that airport terminal; lined faces and worn bodies and cancerous skins and tentative looks and averted eyes welcoming home embarrassed sons and daughters from places their parents had never been.

I collected my luggage, strolled out into the humid afternoon and hailed a cab. From the back seat I looked out at the scruffy suburban houses and messy warehouses of Boondall and Nundah and wondered why the hell I'd come back. The cabbie dropped me off at the Albion address and I walked up to the flat Billy Drahaam had arranged for me (too busy to pick me up, he'd said) and flopped down on the divan. Then immediately jumped up. Don't sleep, I told myself. Avoid jet lag. Stay awake until normal bedtime.

But bedtime was hours away. I grabbed a beer, thoughtfully left by my absent friend, and sat out on the deck watching the sky darken over the city (I'd forgotten how quickly it got dark in Brisbane) and listening to the sounds of the city: the constant swoosh of cars along Sandgate Road, the distant roar of planes in and out of Eagle Farm and, from somewhere unseen, the rumble of commuter trains. I could have been in any city. Except for the air, that seductive night time Brisbane air, neither hot nor cold, that lightly touched the skin and breezed away.

Billy Drahaam came round about eight.

Sorry I'm late mate, he said. Got caught up. Hows the flat? How about a beer? How was the trip?

Whooa Bill, I responded. One thing at a time.

Beer in hand we sat on the balcony looked over Sandgate Road drinking cold XXXX beer, neither of us saying much, watching the traffic pass in an endless stream. I complained about air travel. He complained about the cab business. It grew late.

Billy Drahaam got up, stretched, said, You're probably rooted Will. I'll let you get to bed. Catch you next week at the office. Take it easy.

Then he left.

I was home. What, I asked myself, had I done. I was thirty seven years old, alone and back where I thought I'd never be.

I woke early, needing fresh air. I took a walk through the back blocks of Albion and Ascot. Familiar territory, the streets much the same as they were when I'd cycle through them as a child; all neat kerbs and gutters, shady trees and grand wooden houses. A soft breeze blew the sweat from my face. As I walked along I began to notice things that once would have eluded me. There were the houses of course, with their latticed verandas and grand staircases, and the gardens with their flowering Poincianas and ornate gateways and picket fences. They were all part of the legendary architecture of that part of the city. But what intrigued me were the less obvious things: bits of old stone wall hidden behind creepers, bits of glass or steel projecting from surfaces both horizontal and vertical, struggling figs rooted in the stones of road cuttings, old hand-cut gutter stones from the horse and cart days, bolts and nails and hair pins and other sundry detritus thrown from cars or dropped from bags embedded into layers of bitumen. I wondered at these bits and pieces of the urban palimpsest. I wondered what else there might be waiting to be rediscovered from beneath the layers of footpaths, roads, lawns, and driveways. I imagined that if I dug into the surface in the right place I might find revelations. I remembered the dream I'd had; the one where a great slab of concrete covered memory. I began to daydream that I was a mole burrowing down, way down below the surface, tunnelling

down under arterial roads and freeways and industrial sites and railway embankments and airport runways, below all the great complexities of oil refineries and sewerage works and container shipping terminals and levelled and concreted spaces vast as lunar landscapes.

Jet lag, I told myself, and went back to my flat.

I didn't end up working for Bill's taxi company as he'd suggested. I got a job as an engineer with a construction firm. Head office was in the city but most of the work involved the construction of roads and bridges in far-flung parts of the state. My city base was a rented inner city unit near the corner of Alice and Albert streets. I liked being in the city, especially after long periods away at places like Mt Isa and Cloncurry. Whenever I had time I would explore the city, feeling my way around, discovering haunts old and new. One day I found myself on the path leading under the arches of the William Jolly Bridge. In the shadows a big mob of homeless people were gathered together, among them ugly looking black men and down-beaten white men with long matted hair, and toothless black women with swollen bellies and stick-thin legs. An emaciated white man who might have been forty but looked ancient called out a garbled greeting as I passed by. My enthusiastic response (forced and therefore false) elicited a chorus of appreciative calls and shrieks from the mob. I walked on. From a safe distance I looked back. They'd shrunk into the shadows.

The city was like that. Always had been: one moment offering hope and opportunity, the next moment highlighting despair. I'd seen this in London of course, and in other cities, but to encounter such contrasts in Brisbane was in some way more upsetting. I soon learnt that it wasn't the sort of city where you could take anything for granted. Within the city there were places I would escape to. St Stephens Cathedral was a favourite place. I'd go there sometimes after long walks through the city, sit on a wooden pew and rest my weary bones. People would drift in, kneel in prayer for whatever time they could spare then walk out again. Others, obviously tourists (increasingly Asian) would come to gawk. It was good that places like St Stephens remained; places where you could escape the busy streets, places where you could sit in peace among the almost empty pews and gaze up into the mysteries of

stained glass windows. But I could never make a connection with God, whatever he or she or it was. Maybe that was my weakness, that inability to make the required leap of faith. Maybe it was my father and he vehement atheism.

Despite my initial doubts about returning I got to like my old but rapidly changing (changing) city. It might not have been as complex or diverse as London but it was getting there; becoming a city of the world, its demography beginning to match the complexity and richness of its topography. In the city well-dressed business and legal people strode purposefully about between workers in *hard yakka* cloths and sturdy boots hurried about and tourists gawked and schoolkids swarmed in gangs along the mall and homeless people bent to pick up cigarette stubs and spaced out drug-addicts wandered about looking for a hit and downcast people, barefoot, dirty, smelly, skulked towards dank corners of parks or churchyards to hole up for the night wrapped in evil-smelling blankets and papers. There is something about all cities - the way they are forever changing, sometimes slowly, sometimes in a great rush - that makes them interesting. Some cities grow old (gracefully or otherwise), some simply die and others develop. Observing Brisbane in those days was like watching a child growing up. It wasn't just the change in size but, like a child, the way it took its cues from what older ones were doing, every now and then peeking to see if it measured up. I guess it didn't quite measure up, but I felt that one day it might. And like a child the future was all, with little desire to check the mirror of its own history and no time or inclination for regret at past mistakes.

Maybe London was a bigger city, with a history and complexity that was compelling, and at times I did long to be back there (or any large city for that matter) but Brisbane had its own complexity. It was a city of strange topographies with its own mysteries; its own largely unknown history hinted at in the names of suburbs; names like Kalinga and Woolloowin and Woolloongabba and Keperra, Nudgee and Toowong and Pinkenba and Wynnum and Indooroopilly; sounds that once rolled easily, and perhaps quite differently to the way we spoke them, from the tongues of the old people.

But my time in the city was limited. Work took me all over the state, and sometimes for long periods. I enjoyed the travel, the work and the company of the site workers, which, back then were mostly male. They'd come from many countries and, for the most part, were full of rough good humour. In my travels along the great development roads of the outback – roads that stretched for hundreds of lonely kilometres – and in way stations and pubs and worker's camps I'd come in contact with miners and drillers and labourers and other workers from different parts of the world. In gatherings after work or on days off there'd occasional be fights but for the most part the men got along well.

In a small town west of Dalby (which I'd rather not name) one of my fellow engineers talked me into attending a local theatrical production of 'The Crucible'. It seemed an odd choice for town that at the time was abuzz with rumours concerning a black woman who was supposed to have caused the death of the daughter of a white grazier family she'd worked for. The woman, who was baby-sitting at the time the child died, was initially charged with murder, but this was dropped to 'causing death by misadventure'. Some claimed the father, a cocky well know as a brutal man - had abused this woman and that he'd threatened to sack her if she reported the abuse. One night the child was left in her care and died mysteriously. Despite the coroner's verdict of death by misadventure there were persistent claims that the black woman had cast a spell on the child. The black men on my team weren't impressed.

I went along to the play and was intrigued by the woman who played Abigail. After the play the cast came out to the foyer for supper and we got talking. I asked her name.

You won't believe this, she said. It's Gail!

She laughed. She was beautiful! That was it for me. And, it seemed, for her. Within six months we were married. In hindsight it was probably a way out for her. She was bored with small town life and I could offer her a base in Brisbane. In the brief courtship (a rather romantic interpretation of what was really lustful adventurism) I spent some time with her parents out on their property. They ran sheep and, in good seasons, wheat. They seemed nice. The first time I met her father was in

the town hardware store where we'd both gone to buy supplies. He reminded me of the big country men I used to see at the Ekka; big beefy men wearing RM Williams clothes: pants, shirts and boots, tweed jackets and Akubra hats. We got talking (as you do in those places) and he found out that I was the bloke 'courting' his daughter.

Ah! He said with a haughty demeanour, Gail's been talking about you!

Oh, I replied.

Says you're a city type.

I couldn't imagine Gail actually saying that but let it pass.

After a few comments about the weather (which was always against the cocky, he said) the conversation stalled.

Well, best be off, he said. He turned to the storekeeper, signed a docket and walked out the door.

I didn't meet her mother until later, after she'd invited me out to the homestead. She was a cultured woman who'd attended a private girl's school in Toowoomba before getting a degree in Arts at Queensland University. Then she'd read English at Cambridge. She spoke like an English lady and was charming. I liked her and I think she liked me, which was a relief.

After we were married Gail and I rented a flat in Indooroopilly. For the first two years she'd often come with me on my travels throughout the state, putting up with accommodation that was often a good deal less than ideal. It was terrific while it lasted but Gail grew restless. She hankered for a more permanent life in the city, with its theatres and crowds. She got a job teaching drama at a posh girl's school and stopped travelling with me. After a few years we saved enough for a deposit on an old Queenslander at Enoggera (which, as was the fashion, we spent several years and more than a bit of cash renovating). She joined a rep theatre company at Kelvin Grove and began to get starring roles. Whenever I came home from a period away she'd welcome me with her great big smile and, for however long I'd be in town, there'd be just the two of us. We'd go to plays (including some she starred in), opera and musical events. She took pride in our house and took charge of the garden. Every

time I came home she'd have something new to show me, maybe a repainted room or a new garden bed or fruit tree. She was happy. So was I.

But construction of roads and bridges intensified, especially in the mining areas, and I had to spend more time away, meaning I never stayed more than a few weeks in town.

You are always away, she said one time. Always working. We haven't had a holiday in ages. I've got a six weeks Christmas break coming up, and a bit of long service. Why don't we take a trip? We've got the money. Maybe go overseas?

We went to London. I showed her the place where I'd lived. She thought it cute. From the outside it was, but I knew how cramped and smelly the bit I rented was. Apart from the memory of Mary's visits there was nothing romantic about it for me. The thought of all those dark and damp nights and lonely weekends made me long for home and the wide-open spaces of the outback. We went to galleries, the theatre, took the boat to Greenwich, explored cathedrals and the Inns of Court. She loved it. Once we'd had our fill of London we went to the Continent and explored all the things travellers to those parts did.

Then we came home and things changed.

Gail complained that she was growing old, said she wanted a child and that soon she'd be past the age of reproduction. We stopped birth control. She became pregnant. We were happy. But she lost the child after three months. She had tests, found out that she couldn't have children. I don't know if she really blamed me but I felt she did. She became distant, took solace in her work, lost interest in the house and garden. Meanwhile my work was taking me away more and more. The Bjelke Petersen government (which we both detested) was opening up the state for development, most of it through mining. Roads and bridges were needed. That was my line of work and I liked what I was doing. Maybe I could have stayed in the city office drafting plans but I wasn't ready for that. I liked the outback. Maybe I was selfish.

Gail stopped getting acting roles. She said they said she was too old and that there were few roles for older women (she was then in her early forties!). That was

hard for her to take. I spent more and more time away with my work. One day I came home to find she'd gone. She left a note saying that she loved me but that she needed a change. Soon after that we divorced and I was on my own again. Then there was an economic downturn and work became scarce. I wasn't laid off but there were weeks when I would work only a few days. With Gail's consent I sold the house and we divided the spoils. With the money I'd invested from the sale of my parent's house I bought a unit in town.

Suddenly I was fifty and alone. I didn't mind all that much. I was free. The economy picked up and for a few years I worked hard and made a packet. Then, at the age of fifty-six I took a packet and retired. I took art classes – life drawing and painting – and began to contemplate the world. I didn't feel old so much as disconnected. I renewed my interest in the city, which was changing fast. People were pouring in from the south and from overseas. Some people bemoaned the loss of the old Brisbane but I liked what was happening; liked what some called 'the new Brisbane'. The old corrupt state government had long gone. Labor controlled both the state and the city. Both governments were, in comparison to what had been, enlightened and progressive. The tired old snide comments from southern visitors began to be replaced by comments like 'there's a good vibe...' I wandered the changing streets, sketching and taking notes in a little drawing book, looking, no doubt, a little like one of my father's famous derros, hopefully without the pissy smell.

I stir myself from these ancient memories (is that all I've got left: memory?) to find my glass empty. I'm hungry. Too tired to bother with cooking I phone for a pizza. It arrives and I sit at my table, chewing salty pizza and sipping red wine. I don't feel too bad. It's the wine. I think of Mary, and how much a part of my life she has become after all this time. There was a time, after the divorce, when I thought we might become more than casual lovers. It started one day in the art gallery. I saw her standing in front of Picassos *La Belle Hollandaise*, one hand holding her chin as if in deep thought. At first I didn't recognise her. Side on, from a distance of maybe ten

paces she looked more beautiful than ever. Some people age well. She did! Seeing her there in that pensive attitude - so unnatural for her I thought - was incredibly moving. All my old feelings towards her flooded back. It was like one of those oddly pleasant dreams where someone familiar appears and draws you into a fantasy world that is so pleasant you want it to go on forever.

I was trying to make up my mind whether to approach her or retreat quietly out of the gallery when she turned and saw me. There was a brief moment of unrecognition, then she smiled; a wonderful smile that lit up her face. We embraced briefly, stood back holding hands and looking at each other like long lost lovers. Which maybe was what we were. I don't know what she felt but I know what I felt. It was longing; for her and for the irrecoverable past that she was part of. In that instant, before the moment passed I knew that, whatever would come to pass, I would always love her. We strolled round the gallery, commenting as we did on various works of art until I'd had enough (I visited the gallery often, but usually in short, sharp bursts) and suggested we get some air.

We went outside, sat beneath the trees, looking out over the river to the city, people coming and going. A soft breeze blew. It felt good. She asked me what my plans were. I told her I didn't have any.

Nothing, she asked.

Nothing, I repeated.

She looked at me for a bit. No plans? No projects? No attachments?

I shook my head. Nothing worth mentioning.

It was one of those classic summer evenings; balmy after the earlier heat and humidity. Apart from the muted sounds of the city it was quiet; the kind of evening when questions can go, well, unanswered.

A penny for your thoughts, she said.

I said was thinking about the city.

Plenty of people do that, she said dismissively.

Maybe.

So! What exactly were you thinking Mr Traverse?

That's what she called me whenever she thought I was getting uppity.

I told her I'd had a dream.

And what was it, this dream?

I was walking, although exactly where was unclear, and I kept seeing things I didn't quite understand. People would appear for an instant and, just as I thought I recognised them, disappear. The dream went on and on, as dreams do. I was on an island with a sandy shore. There was a boy near the water. He was black. Aboriginal maybe. He seemed to be waiting for something. He turned to me, his mouth open in a silent question, but before I could fathom what that question was he disappeared. Leaving a kind of fog. The dream sort of circled round. One moment I'd be walking through city streets full of strange people, the next moment there'd be this beach with this black boy staring. I...I don't know how to say this but I became that boy on the beach and I was staring at something on the beach that frightened me. It was a shape that kept changing. Every time I got close to it and thought I could begin to tell what it might be it would shrivel up and disappear. It frightened me...

You always were strange Will.

After a brief silence she asked what else happened in that dream. I said I couldn't remember, that it was just a dream and dreams never ended.

I looked at her. She was looking at me. I raised my eyebrow, asked what she was looking at.

You ARE attractive Will.

As if that was some sort of revelation to her.

I can't remember how that day ended. All I know is that we saw each other often after that. People talk of their muse. I guess she was mine. Her and the city. They were strange muses, never consistent, always teasing, playing devils advocate, disappointing me one moment, cheering me the next. Both in their way attractive but both, well, ultimately disappointing.

Could I ever really belong to either of them?

We saw each other a lot for a while there and it looked like getting serious, but then she disappeared. I guess she'd made a decision: her life with her husband or life with me. She never said. I didn't see her again until several years later when she called to say she was in hospital.

I sip more wine. Old wino me! I'm thinking about cities, and how they reveal themselves slowly. You have to dig and be on the lookout to get the most out of them. I guess Brisbane was never going to be a great city but even as a child bicycling through the back streets I thought it could be. The city I now found myself in seemed at times to be reaching that potential. It wasn't just the physical side of things – all those towering buildings and river walks – but its changing demographics and, for me at least, a growing awareness of its pre-European history. I renewed my interest in some of the old sites; visited places like the bora rings at Kupidabin and Toombul Point and Nudgee. I read as much as I could and was fascinated not only by the ancient rituals that took place in those places but also by the complex relationships that existed between the early European settlers and the old people. As a child I was fascinated by the black people I'd see, right from that time my father took me to South Brisbane and we saw the black man being led away by the police. I'd read what literature I could find, including C. C. Petrie, Thomas Welsby and J. G. Steele. My belief that the city had a long unwritten history – one that people better equipped than me should explore – was strengthened.

They were interesting times, full of wonder about 'my' city. But to some extent they have been replaced by a kind of torpor, and a realisation that I am past the age when I could make any great contribution to this city I love. And so I sit pouring more wine into my empty glass, thinking not of the city but of her. I take the glass out onto the balcony. The city is out there; a city of two million people. How come I'm alone?

8

I love this time of year, with its cold mornings and warm clear days. There's an hour or so in the morning, before the surrounding buildings shade my south-east facing balcony, when I can sit and enjoy the warmth of the rising sun. At such time I'm reminded of those days when I was small, sitting on the front veranda of our old house on winter mornings, daydreaming in the sheltered warmth, the air cool but the sun warm and an unearthly quiet, as if one's ears are blocked and you were in a place where the grubby everyday could not enter. On days like these I am, for maybe just a few moments, that little boy, sitting on the front veranda of the old house, listening to the Butcher-birds warbling and the fog horns of ships in the distant Brisbane River, mind wandering over all sorts of ideas and thoughts; thoughts that, the moment they have passed, are impossible to recollect.

The sun goes behind the building. I feel cold, go inside to work on my manuscript. She calls, says she has something to tell me. It sounds urgent. I tell her I'll come immediately.

No Will, she says. Tomorrow. New Farm Park. Near the ferry. After lunch. It'll be warm then. Say three O'clock.

I'm surprised. Last time I saw her at the hospital she seemed beaten. Now, apparently, she is well enough to meet me at New Farm Park. I've known too many people who have had that battle with cancer, some surviving, some not. None of it was nice to see. But it wasn't cancer I was worried about; there was something else; something in the way she'd said she had something to tell me. What, I wondered, could it be? I endure a restless night wondering what that 'something' might be and why she has chosen New Farm Park.

I rise early and shower, have a quick breakfasted and, too agitated to settle down to anything, decide to walk to the park. It's an opportunity to enjoy what is a typically clear June day. First stop is my favourite Riverside coffee house. I order a long black and sit watching the river. It's a working day. On the river ferries come and go, disgorging workers at the various berths. Assorted pleasure boats drift by.

Along the riverside promenade, where overseas steamers once loaded cargo from busy wharves to the cries of blue-singletted wharfies, pass casually dressed pedestrian, businessmen, lycra-clad cyclists, rollerbladers, goggle-eyed tourists.

The coffee comes; long and black. Zip! Caffeine! Restored, I push the cup away. A waiter comes by, asks if I want a top-up.

One more cup of coffee, I reply, before I go...

What? Asks the bemused waiter.

To the valley below...

He goes away, shaking his head. He brings a second cup. I finish it and set off along the river walk. At the Customs House I stop, gazing at the convict built tide-stained wall rising out of the river like some transposed Thames landmark; a reminder of harsher times. I leave the river and go up Ivory Street to the narrow footway that leads under the Story Bridge. It's a short cut few people know of and even fewer use. Which isn't surprising given it's little more than a narrow path along the cliff edge, with only a steel rail for protection. I stop midway (before they built the Gateway Bridge this was once one of the city's favourite suicide jumping off points). Far below the tide-running river turns sharply round Kangaroo Point. Above me traffic thunders in an unending stream across the bridge.

Wind whips up from the river. Southerly. Cool. I tighten my grip. Vertigo! And for a moment there, child-like excitement. A citycat ferry curves round the point, trailing a wide V wake on which moored yachts bob like corks. It all seems small and far away. The river stretches away to the south in two great parallel reaches; one downstream between the posh-looking apartment towers of Kangaroo Point and the older towers of New Farm, the other upstream past the city. In the late morning light the city's towers shimmer, sun reflecting off glass and steel. There's nothing left of Evans Deakin shipyards where my father once worked apart from some rotting wooden piers rising out of the water where the fitting out wharves used to be. The foundries, slipways and workshops have long gone, replaced by apartment blocks and private moorings for million dollar super yachts, the dry dock that used to take the biggest ships is now a boat haven for the wealthy. At the very tip of the point, in

Captain John Bourke Park, a group of black people play touch rugby: tiny figures from another reality. Round the bend that once served as the swinging basin for the city's merchant shipping commuter ferries came and went, competing for space with speedboats, pleasure craft, yachts, dredges and hulking cement barges. The ships that used to tie up along the wharves at Petrie Bight had long gone, along with the wharves and the wharfies and the hustle and bustle of a city port.

I look down on the city I thought I knew. It's not the one I left all those years ago. It's a new city down there; one that has emerged chrysalis-like from a time when nothing was expected of it. The buildings that rise phallic-like from the riverbanks speak of confidence and brash certainty. Brisbane, brash and masculine, obliterating all evidence of the softness that was there in the very meaning of the name *mi an jin*; a name that once rolled feminine and softly from less competitive tongues. In a little more than one hundred and fifty years it had grown from convict jails and tentative building blocks hacked out of fecund river flats to this. I find it all hard to believe. I eye the glittering towers, wondering about the money that flows in and out, the deals that are done, the absurd profits and appalling losses made. From within those towers well-dressed types emerge late in the day to drink cocktails at the numerous bars and restaurants that now line the river. The money end of town, where well-off people fight their own ambitious battles, oblivious to the dark places beneath certain city bridges where drunken homeless people gathered to fight over blankets and cardboard boxes.

Just round from the swinging basin where the cliff face drops to McGrossan Street, near the remains of the stone wall that Andrew Petrie built with convict labour in the 1830s, on the old Patrick's Wharf one warm night in the Summer of 1963, Billy Drahaam, Ben Fraser and I had caught mud crabs. You could do that then, right in the heart of the city. There's nothing left of those wharves. They've been replaced by fancy promenades and high-rise apartment blocks casting long shadows across the water.

And yet, wildlife persists A pelican glides effortlessly just above the surface. A skink lizard runs along the rail, comes right up to my hand then darts into hiding. A

pair of Nankeen Kestrels searches for prey along the cliff edge. A Brahminy Kite hovers in the air. Wild things oblivious to the constant hum of traffic on the bridge and the bustle of the city.

I walk out from under the bridge into the bright light of Wilson's Outlook. A woman in a colourful dress is playing with her children on the swings. Islanders. Fijian, Samoan...? They seemed happy. Across Bowen Terrace a woman sits on her balcony three floors up, looking out over the park and the river, beneath her Indian shawl the bright glint of an eye. She'd have had a good view from there. Is she looking to the mountains of the border ranges far to the south or to some imagined place? Like I used to do from the front veranda of the old house, and still do from my balcony. A shiny black BMW pulls up outside the units and a smartly dressed woman gets out, clicks the remote lock with a flourish, and goes in. I guess real estate. Businesslike. She reminded me of Mary Wright; the way she used to 'present' as an air hostess. Spend hours getting it all just right: hair, uniform... An old couple walk by, the woman holding a parasol, the man's head under a white hat. Natty! Hard years behind them, harder years ahead!

A shriek of delight! I turn. One of the Islander children is swinging high and carefree, wind in the hair. I suffer a tinge of regret. How, I wonder again, had I wound up alone and childless? My parents are long dead and it's been a long time since the last human relationship of any significance had ended. I try to recollect the last time anyone had been proud for me, the way parents are when children achieve even small things. There were times when it mattered what they thought but all I can conjure up of that past, and that is with effort, are fleeting memories that will not hold. It isn't so much that they have gone - my parents and the others - but rather that they no longer matter. Even the photos I've kept for so long - small fragile things with torn edges falling out of scrapbooks - have faded. When I try to remember a particular moment or happy occurrence I can't fill in the details.

Silver leaching from disintegrating photographic paper. Leaving surfaces blank as death.

There were names of course, from different periods of my life, names that once meant something but had long faded into the general background of that abstract canvas that was the past. Mary Wright was the only one who had offered any real intimacy, but she came and went at her choosing, appearing almost magically and just as miraculously disappearing. Now she wants to see me. What for?

On Brunswick Street I check my watch. Still time to fill. I go into a commercial art gallery. It's a different world. Cool, carpet on the floor, well framed paintings on the walls, small bronze busts on plinths. Everything just right. Good taste. Reputation to uphold. I walk round the gallery, past paintings by well-known artists, wondering as I go about the art market (of which, in my own small way, I am part of). Money made from paintings of no particular significance. Whiff of corruption difficult to pin down. I'm the only one in the gallery. No one comes to ask anything of me. I walk out.

The Institute of Modern Art just down the road, is a different kettle of fish. Funny saying that: kettle of fish. Variation on fine kettle of fish, or pretty kettle of fish. Scottish in origin some say. For some reason the phrase seemed apposite. The IMA isn't about good taste, at least not accepted good taste. I watch a video of a man sitting on a pile of sticks in the middle of a park. He's dressed in black and wears a golden bird's head. Above the bird head is a yellow fluorescent tube. On the shirtfront is a red dot. It takes a while to work out that it's from a laser beam. Nothing much happens. People come to look – boys on bikes, young mothers pushing baby strollers, men in jogging gear. They stop for a few moments to stare at the bird-headed figure, then move on. Performance art. Difficult to deal in. Still, you never knew. Must be a profit there somewhere. Documentation: that was the go. There are collectors of paintings, why not collectors of performance art documentation. Christo's wrappings! All that's left of them are photos. Worth a mint. I wonder vaguely if I should change my small collection of prints; concentrate on documentation.

I'm back on Brunswick Street, heading towards the park. Brunswick Street is a hotchpotch of once-grand wooden houses long converted into flats with rickety

external fire escapes and broken windows proclaiming poverty, art deco buildings long past their prime, wooden corner grocery shops dating from the time before delis, fibro and weatherboard houses with broken front steps, city fringe offices of dubious intent, new high-rise units offering views of the river... People claim Brunswick Street has charm. I think it's shabby.

On a set of tumble-down steps leading down from the front veranda of an old wooden house ripe for demolition two Islander women in colourful cotton print dresses sit chatting animatedly while a huge man in an All Black rugby jumper tidies the lawn. From somewhere unseen country music blasts out of a tinny radio. The women wave at me, yell something I don't catch but which I assume is meant to be amusing. I laugh with them, just in case.

At number 867 an old gap-toothed man tidies leaves from a garden bare of any vegetation apart from a patch of withered grass that once might have passed for lawn. The leaves keep coming, blowing in from the neighbouring garden that, in stark contrast, approximates a rain forest. The man grunts an incoherent greeting as I pass.

A little further on two blue-rinsed English ladies and an unshaven man with a Yugoslavian flag tied to his belt wait for a bus. The English ladies say hello in perfect old English accents. The Yugoslav patriot grunts at something far away. Further on a postman drops letters in a mailbox, offers a cheery G'day, then goes on his way, helloing and hoo-rooing to all and sundry.

At New Farm Park I stroll through the rose gardens with their neat rows of flowers and old-country names printed on little plaques: *Peace, Abraham Lincoln, Maria Callas, French Lace, Apricot Charm, Gold Bunny*... People stroll by, some dressed in summer clothes, others walking full-dressed, even on this by now warm Winter's day as if they might be strolling through some high summer English garden.

Near the ferry landing I find a seat in the shade of a Poinciana. The river looks blue. Trick of light! There is little river traffic, just the ferry arcing in against the tide's run, sliding sideways in to the landing pontoon. Three passengers disembark, two get on and the ferry sets off for the far shore where, at the water's edge, the rails of the ferry landing gleam white in the tidewater light. Beyond the shore the land

slopes steeply up: snatches of white weatherboard houses and red corrugated iron roofs among the subtropic vegetation.

Between these ferry landings the tiny wooden ferryboats chug day in, day out throughout the year, battling surging tides and occasional floods. Between these landings pass the river's offerings to the eventual sea: old tree stumps and logs from forests further upstream, dead cattle and sheep from drought-affected farms, bits of houses and sheds and fences from past floods or fires, old tin drums once full of god only knew what, suitcases, spray cans, bottles and used condoms from the city, acres of water hyacinths and, occasionally, bloated human bodies; anything in fact that the river and all its tributaries can offer from sewers, stormwater drains, flooded or fire ravaged paddocks and the million minor and careless accidents and thoughtless acts of the people. All bound, despite the counter effects of tide and wind, for the river's end. To be composted there all colourless and formless with silt and tidal sand into new banks and drifts, new patterns for navigation charts, new places for seed to lodge and burst forth mangrove life. Season after season.

Further downstream, before the river turns into Bulimba Reach, the bank rises steeply. A winding set of steps, cut into the rock face, leads up from the water's edge to a cluster of dark red brick buildings at the top. Lourdes Hill College looks faintly medieval, a darkly brooding reminder of older, more disciplined cultures, an improbable fortress of foreign learning and culture, clinging on, for the moment at least, to some approximation of its original purpose. In this city, so slatternly subtropic for the most part, you can still find such places; places with dark entrances and long shadowy cloisters leading to quiet places of prayer and contemplation; odd out of the way places where the light seems not to enter and where you can imagine old monks dressed in black robes walking dark corridors. The medieval mind of man! There are such places, even in this modern city; places hardly anyone ever goes into, yet fitting into the warp and weft of the city.

A citycat ferry speeds in from upstream and docks. A crowd of people get off. She's not among them. The ferry departs and another pulls in from downriver, disgorges passengers, picks a few up and departs. It's quiet. Then I see her, walking

along the river path from the direction of Brunswick Street, an elegantly dressed woman. She comes towards me, a smart-looking woman who might have been at home in some chic European city, the smile beneath her sunglasses containing a hint of sadness.

Hello, she says softly as she sits beside me. Beautiful time of day!

I nod agreement.

Cat got your tongue Will?

For what seems ages we sit looking out over the river. I think about that monastery across the water and how it seems so out of place. I think about Mary Wright sitting beside me with her sunglass style, and how she too seems out of place. Brisbane is like that; among the shoddiness of the old parts and the gleaming glass and steel of the new there'd be places like that building, while among the flabby anonymous crowds there'd be people like her! It's all very confusing.

Except that Mary is sick and somehow everything seems superficial.

I tell Mary the last time I came to New Farm Park was with my mother and father when I was about six and that my mother had insisted on taking us through the rose gardens, saying they reminded her of England. My father had snorted that she'd never been to bloody England, which she hadn't! Not then.

You're funny Will.

You've said that before!

Sorry. I suppose you're wondering why I brought you here?

I was.

It's not easy, she says.

What's not easy?

Well, talking to you for starters...

Sorry.

Anyway, I've something to tell you, she says with a look I can't fathom.

Well?

I'm not sure how to say this, she says, looking away.

Say what, I ask.

That...well, that you...

That I?

She pauses. Not sure you know, but I have a daughter.

I didn't know. Indeed, I knew little about her family life. It was something we never discussed.

Well, you wont like this...but I have to tell you...

Tell me what for Christ sake?

I'm sorry. I thought you might have known... that I had a child...

I didn't know Mary. When...

Long ago, Will. Anyway... Well I do and... well, she is... she's... our daughter. Your daughter!

And so I find out, sitting in a park by the river, that Mary Wright and I had been more than casual lovers, that our relationship – such as it was – had been consummated not in marriage but in a daughter. A daughter I never knew. For a while everything is a blur. Out of which I slowly emerge to find her holding my hand.

I feel like tearing my hand away. I want to shout at her. But I don't. I just sit, staring at nothing. I'm not even angry. I never can be with her, at least not for long. I am vaguely aware of the outside world going about its business; ferryboats coming and going; a child running across the grass chasing an Ibis pecking at scraps...

A child! Me!

We sit, saying nothing.

The sun sinks behind the trees. A chill wind blows in from the south. I shiver.

Are you cold Will?

I shake my head, ask why she hasn't told me before.

Because by the time I found out I was pregnant you had moved on. You had your own life. Anyway, my parents would never have let me keep it. They had it... I shouldn't say 'it' should I? The baby was adopted out. A girl. I hardly saw her. I wanted to tell you but by then you'd gone to London. I didn't want to spoil your plans; your career...

My career! That was a joke.

She takes off her sunglasses, wipes her eyes. I've never seen her cry. It wasn't her style.

I wanted to tell you Will. Many times I tried. That time in London... I nearly did then. Other times too. But couldn't. Not til now. I'm sorry.

Does she have a name?

Her name...? It's Grace.

I look at Mary Wright sitting there. She looks sad. I can't be angry. I recall how, on certain occasions, she'd get these dreamy looks in her eyes; looks which accompanied odd comments that may have been cryptic clues, or pleas for something I was too stupid to read.

And does he know? George! What does he think?

He knows. He has accepted it. It was a long time ago. We were innocents. He's been good that way. Doesn't know about you though. Well, he knows you exist of course, but not that you're the father. I couldn't tell him that.

How... When did you find her?

Oh, a few years ago. I did the usual tracing through the authorities. By the time I found her she was a grown woman living in Hong Kong. I went there. It was awkward. Grace was a mature woman. Had her own life, her own parents. I haven't seen her since but we keep in touch.

She's married?

Yes. Married a Chinese bloke called Hung. Phillip Hung. She's now Grace Hung. Two children. Both Hungs. Odd isn't it?

It's funny, I say after a long pause.

What's funny Will?

Well... you know... The way things turn out. All these years I thought I was childless, that there'd be no continuation of the Traverse line. Now it seems there will be. Well, not exactly Traverse, but...

A barge goes by, a silent shape in the river.

Not many of them now, I say.

Many what?

Barges: coal, cement, gravel... they used to ply the river once. Made it more interesting. River industry. All gone. All commuter ferries and pleasure boats now...

Hmmm, she says, gazing out over the river.

The afternoon draws on. It gets cool in the shade. We move out into a patch of late sun.

How is the book going, she asks.

I tell her I'm struggling a bit with Molly Doolan.

Read it to me Will. It might help.

It's true. Reading to her has helped, but right now I'm not in the mood.

Well, she says.

I tell her I don't have the manuscript and that it doesn't seem important any more.

She doesn't say anything, just sits staring out over the river. As I do. Then she turns to me and says, life goes on Will. And, anyway, you can't undo the past.

Can't undo the past? Maybe not.

Talk to me Will, she says after a long pause, tell me about your story. What happened to Jabiru?

I tell her that in my story Jabiru reunites with Geebung and that together they journey to the bonyi.

Bonyi! What's bonyi, she asks.

Old pronunciation for Bunya. Or so I'm told. You know, the bunya tree. Latin name *Araucaria Bidwilli*. They produce enormous nuts which ripen every three years. Individual trees were owned by individual people. The old people used to have these great ceremonies or festivals where people would gather and roast the nuts.

Booberran Ngummin the ceremonies were called. Or something like that...

Bunya pine, she says, interrupting. We used to have one in our yard I think. I climbed it once... Sorry. So, Jabiru goes to this festival...

Yes. It was a difficult leaving. Jabiru told James Bolan that he was going one day after work. You can imagine the scene: two men standing in the yard in silence, the lowing of cattle and the occasional caw of a crow the only sounds. James Bolan

had come to see Jabiru as more than just another employee. They were friends. It was a friendship that James Bolan valued.

What about the child, she asks.

James Bolan saw that Jabiru had made up his mind Mary. Bolan did wonder if he should tell Jabiru about the child but dismisses the idea, thought it best that Jabiru was able to leave unencumbered with such knowledge.

But Jabiru knew. Surely!

Maybe so. Anyway...

I can't continue. I can't stop thinking about what she's just told me; not exactly thinking so much as mulling things over. Nothing makes sense.

She reaches out and holds my hand. The patch of sun we were in is now shade. I feel cold.

Perhaps we should go, she says.

I nod.

My car is over there, she says, indication the direction of Brunswick Street. I'll give you a lift home.

She parks the car outside my place and I undo the seatbelt. She reaches out and grabs my arm.

Can I come up, she says wistfully.

I fix a couple of drinks and we sit together on my sofa.

George at home, I ask.

She says no, that he's away.

So, she says after a while, what are you thinking Will?

I'm not sure how to respond. It's all too hard. After another silence she says, bugger it Will, continue with your story. Read me from the manuscript. It's better that way. And I can do the editor thing.

She giggles at this and I can't help it; I smile.

I get the manuscript and open it. For a while I sit staring at the pages. The writing's a blur.

Go on, she says, we haven't got all day.

I begin to read.

Jabiru and Geebung follow an old track north. At Kallangur they are joined by a small mob from Beaudesert. At Burpengary they meet up with a contingent from Moggil, and, a little further on a small mob from the plains of Jimboomba. Among the crowd progressing slowly through the land are men and women who have left unpaid labouring jobs in the town and on the farms, street beggars and pregnant women. There are old people who have to be helped along and babies too young to walk; all remnants of a once great nation decimated by white men's disease, displacement and persecution. Yet, among these people Jabiru feels an optimism he has not experienced since the bora. All, he feels, is not lost.

They go through undulating country beyond Caboolture, across creeks shaded by dense rainforest and open country fire-cleared long ago by the old people. They near the great volcanic plugs named the Glasshouse Mountains by a man called Captain James Cook. In the shadow of Tibberawaccum, the tallest and most formidable of them all, they set camp for the night.

Tibberawaccum?

Yes Mary. Tibberawaccum: the largest of the Glasshouse Mountains. Captain Cook...

I know, I know. Go on...

Jabiru stands with Geebung gazing up at the mountain's forbidding face. Tibberawaccum looks angry, he says. It is the white men...

The two men watch the sun setting behind the great mountain god of the Gubbi Gubbi people. In the distance Beerwah, Ngungun, Coonowrin, Miketeeburnulgrai and all the lesser gods of that plain fade into dark shapes of the night. The two men stand very still, taking in the drama of the setting and sensing the ancient presences on what was once, and might yet be, theirs people's land. The sky darkens and stars appear: galaxies in the night sky, markers in a long-lost dreaming story beyond Jabiru's learning.

Beneath Tibberawaccum's dark presence stories are told round campfires and songs are sung. Disagreements are raised and quickly settled. The last calls and shrieks of children fade. Here and there, round dying fires, elders speak soft words of encouragement to each other. The camp goes quiet. Jabiru looks over the gathering. He is among his people. This night he sleeps soundly beneath a sky split by bright stars.

Only to be woken by dreadful cries. He rises and creeps towards the sound, fearing he knows not what: maybe a raid from white riders or, worse, the black police. What he finds is even more astonishing. A group of old women are squatting in the dirt tearing at their hair and yelling to the heavens in high-pitched primal screams. Beyond the wailing women, over in the main camp, others are quietly going about the business of preparing morning meals. Jabiru has never heard the cry and it bothers him. Somewhere within those dreadful calls lie unexplainable things from another, older, world.

Geebung appears beside Jabiru.

It's the call for the dead, he says in a whisper.

Jabiru can't recall hearing such a thing on the island, nor did he ever hear it during his travels with the old man; nor at the bora site or anywhere else.

Don't hear it anymore, Geebung adds. Used to go up most mornings in the old days. Not just women either. Old men too. Maybe old Tibberawaccum has stirred the women up. Or maybe some noise in the night brought back memories of the dead; stirred up old hatreds.

The calls die. Quiet descends on the camp.

Bloody black woman magic. Scare off the devil, says Geebung.

And they laugh out loud.

I stop reading.

What's the matter, she says.

I tell her that there are some things that are difficult to say in words, that sometimes I find I'm out of my depth, that I'm dealing with stuff I maybe shouldn't

be. Truth is I'm having trouble concentrating. I keep thinking about what she has revealed.

Like you said Will; it's only a story.

Maybe, I reply, but that's no excuse for bad writing.

My mind is whirling. The manuscript feels heavy. I want to toss it in the river, to be done with it. It's all too hard. It's not just my story that's troubling me; it's what she has told me. I'm all mixed up. My story seems irrelevant.

Come on, she says, holding my hand, snap out of it. You have to finish. Finishing is always hard, she adds. I should know.

I'm not sure what she means. I scan the open page, the clumsy attempt to imagine a long-gone world. With a shrug I pick up where I'd left off.

Geebung and Jabiru are about to return to their fire when a young man approaches them.

What was that, the young man asks.

Geebung explains the cry for the dead.

Never heard it among our people, offers the young man.

And who might they be, asks Jabiru.

I am Coochin, the young man says. From the Noonuccal people of Dunbar.

Noonuccal! Why, I am Noonuccal, Jabiru exclaims. Do you remember an old man who came and took a boy away from the Dunbar shore, Jabiru asks.

Coochin slaps his face. Of course! I remember. I was there on the beach. An old man and a boy... going away. Going to the bora. That boy... was you?

The broad smile on Coochin's lips fades. He looks sad. I never did go, he says. I was too late. There were no more boras after you left. You were the last of our people to be properly initiated. The last warrior! We waited for you to return but you never came.

Over a meal of damper, snake and bird's eggs they share their stories. Jabiru and Geebung tell Coochin of their adventures with Jamboor. Coochin tells a long story about how he left the island in the company of another young man seeking he

knew not what and how, like Jabiru and Geebung, he became angry at what he saw happening to his people and how he fell in with some elders from the south who taught him many things.

It was them, he adds, who told me about the bonyi, which, they said, will be a great renewal of our people.

They leave Tibberawaccum and his stern face of stone glistening dewdrops in the early morning light. Near Toogoolawah more people join them. Among the mob working their way north are Ngunda people from the Bribie area, Turrbal people from the Brisbane area, Yaggapal people from the Logan River and many others. There's also a white man by the name of Doyle, a morose individual who, whenever they stop, makes his own camp, finds his own food and cooks at his own fire. He is regarded as odd because he acts neither black nor white. There is about him a sadness, as though he'd suffered some great loss for which he will never recover.

Coochin, who seemed to know a great deal more than his age suggests, explains that Doyle was a white convict who escaped captivity and lived with black people for many years before returning to the town where he found himself an outsider forced to drift between the two peoples like a lost soul.

Jabiru is drawn to the reclusive white man who reminds him of Sid from The Pine. He walks alongside the man called Doyle, who doesn't seem to mind. Neither speaks. In the long hike up the range and through thickening forest they walk together in silence. Only when they reach the edge of the bonyi clearing does Doyle turn to Jabiru. The two men stand face to face. Doyle smiles and puts out his hand in friendship the way the white people do. Jabiru takes the proffered hand, looks at Doyle eye to eye. In those eyes Jabiru sees suffering. Jabiru recalls the sadness he'd seen in the German man called Otto. He recalls some of the things Sid said about the convict who'd escaped and journeyed between black and white cultures. Doyle is different to anyone he has known; a man living in some nether world, a man more dispossessed than he is. The two men stand together, hands locked in a kind of embrace, until Geebung and Coochin appear. Doyle smiles a lopsided smile, pulls his hand free and turns away.

What was that all about, asks Geebung.

Nothing, Jabiru says and turns away.

In a vast clearing beneath towering bonyi trees a great host has gathered. From scattered campfires comes the sweet smell of roasting bonyi nuts. The air is thick with it. The three young men wander about the encampment. In a natural amphitheatre cleared of vegetation, up against the slope of a steep hill, a dance is in progress. Lines of painted men – spirit figures from some ancient time and place – dance to rhythms older than time, telling stories of old. In other places stories are being told by old men. By one small fire an old woman addresses an audience of three young women in a language Jabiru does not know. In another clearing a dozen or more young men are playing a game with a ball made from the stomach lining of a kangaroo.

For three days and nights they wander among the festive throng until, one night, prompted by Geebung and Coochin, Jabiru agrees to tell his own story at the big story ground. People gather round. At first Jabiru is shy but he sees the people sitting quietly in expectation and, so emboldened, begins. To the beat of clapping sticks and didgeridoos, and other instruments hitherto unknown to him, Jabiru dances the death of the convict on the deserted beach, he dances his journey to the bora and his travels to the interior and his adventures with the outlaws. And as he dances and swirls and prances and moves to music as old as time he knows that he is dancing away a part of his life. He dances until he is overtaken by exhaustion.

After several days the great gathering breaks up. People gather what possessions they have and leave; some in small bands, some alone. Geebung, reunited with some of his own people, has gone back to what he says is his country. After begging Jabiru to accompany him Coochin has gone back to the island. Jabiru, not ready to go back to the island, wanders alone. He thinks that maybe he'll find work on a farm or on some holding near the town, but there is no work and he finds himself, after many months and near starving, going from dirty camp to dirty camp. What he sees – indeed what he is part of - depresses him. All that he had learnt at the bora now seems useless and the euphoria of the bonyi has long dissipated. The great

renewal that Geebung had promised would come through the bonyi did not eventuated. The land has been taken and his culture is torn beyond redemption. This is the hard truth.

A growing desperation gnaws at Jabiru. His people are dying. Death from disease stalks even the fittest. Jabiru is tired of going from place to place. When he does find work it is menial and he is treated badly. When he finds companionship it is fleeting. He is tired of the growing desperation that is all around him, tired of feeling sorry for himself and for his people. He learns that Geebung had been caught by the soldiers and hanged at the windmill. Jamboor has long disappeared. They were the only people Jabiru knew who'd had any guts, who'd stood up to the white people.

They were the last of the warriors.

I stop reading. Mary has snuggled against me, maybe is asleep. I don't mind. The reading is oddly therapeutic. Mary stirs but her eyes are shut. She murmurs something but I'm not sure what it is. I shrug and continue reading to myself.

It's late. The midnight hour has come and gone. Andrew Bolan is in bed. Kate too. It's quiet. Georgina Bolan is at her desk, lamp flickering, moths fluttering in and out the open window. She is sitting with her hands folded on her lap, gazing at nothing. Her journal, which she has tended to neglect since the school has grown and taken so much of her energy, lies open at the last entry; one concerning Molly Doolan. It's surprisingly cold this late hour. Georgina wraps her coat close to her, shrugs, dips her pen in the ink and begins to write.

We have news of Molly. She is in the Benevolent Asylum at Dunwich on Stradbroke Island. James found this out through his friend Jock Campbell who runs a supply boat to the island. Jock also supplies the leper colony at Peel Island. Apparently she is confused and at times rambling, though all things considered, seems reasonably happy. She has made friends with one of the inmates.

Andrew took me on a boat trip to Dunwich last year. It is a pretty place and the climate there is wonderful. Perhaps Molly is happy there. I hope so.

Kate is a young woman now and is keen to join me teaching at our school. We now have some seventy students of all ages and a small choir, which Mrs McAlister is training. Another school has started on the south side by a Mister McAlister. There is also talk of a government school.

James and Eliza and the children are doing well. James already is talking of the time when young Andrew will take over the run. He has bought another property nearby, which he hopes Jack will one day manage.

I have come to accept that Brisbane is now my home, and that I will never go back to the old country. My children are here, and my grandchildren...

Georgina Bolan wants to continue but does not have the energy. Another incomplete entry, she sighs.

For Molly Doolan the world had never made much sense. Nor did it seem fair. If her troubled childhood, which she could barely recall, and then only with pain, had been hard, if the passage to this new world had seemed like a journey to the Hell she'd heard that priest describe that one time she'd been taken to the village church, life in the colony was for the most part hell itself. There were moments, like the time by the river with Jacky the black man, and one or two moments with Eliza, when the world had for a moment seemed fair. But these moments were few and always, it seemed, led to disappointment.

Her only child, on whom she could have ministered the love that was within her, had been taken away and she had fled to the town. It was difficult at first and she was forced for a while there to beg on the streets. That was until the nuns took pity on her and she was given a position in the hospital laundry where she worked among hardened women in a new and different version of hell. After hard days of sweat and steam she would go home to her small room behind a brothel in, of all places, Mary Street. There she would sit for hours in the gloom, doing nothing. For many years she

worked at the hospital, carrying out her duties without complaint before illness drained the last of her strength and madness came upon her and she found herself an inmate in the benevolent asylum at Dunwich.

There she would sit on the shady veranda looking out over the common that sloped down to the shore and across the sparkling water of the bay to the mainland, trying to figure out how she came to be in that place full of bent old people.

Don't feel sorry for me she would say to those daring to enquire after her health. It was the young nurses, more than the Sisters, who infuriated her with their patronising ways. Molly Doolan would sit for hours looking out over the waters of the bay and the distant mainland that, in her imagination, might have been her real green Ireland. She watched the tides come and go and the ships coming and going and she marvelled quietly at the life out there in a world of which she was no longer a part. Seasons came and went. Winters were idyllic but it was summer she liked best, days when, after the sticky morning humidity, the sea breeze would rise and blow away all tears. Or those dramatic summer days when the pressure would drop and she would watch the storms build across the bay and the world would go dark and she would rage and sing out at the storm like a mad woman.

There were moments when she was happy enough, with her bed and regular meals and her friend Mabel who, alone among the inmates, seemed to have retained her faculties and who, like Molly Doolan, got annoyed when the nursing staff treated them like children. Molly and Mabel would sit together saying little. Mostly they'd comment on the weather or share complaints about the home, but at times one or the other would unburden their sorrows.

I don't know what to think Mabel, she would say. Sometimes I cannot bear it.

Mabel, who had suffered like Molly, knew what she meant. They sometimes tried to recall and share their childhoods - Molly's in Ireland and Mabel's in Glasgow - but neither could bring any details into clear focus let alone articulate their real feelings from those times to another person. There were times when Molly Doolan would remember little things from her past but they would become muddled or, worse, supremely sad, and she'd have to shake them off. Sometimes in the quiet of

the night, when all she could hear was the gentle sound of bay waves lapping against the shore, visions would come that were frustratingly real. She saw a figure that she thought was her father, a ghostly presence who would appear in doorways then vanish. Other times she'd see him (at least she thought it was him) standing at the hearth in front of the mantle piece between a crucifix on one side and a picture of Our Lady on the other. Her memories of her mother were even more mixed up and confused. On the one hand there was a young woman smelling of soap cradling Molly Doolan in her arms and singing songs sweet and low. On the other hand there was a large and bitter woman in smelly clothes screaming oaths into the foul and dusty air of dark and messy rooms full of children. Of all the children - she knew that there were many - she remembered only one older brother, Declan, who was once kind to her but who vanished from her life. She had vague memories of some sort of school, or hall, that she went to for a year or so, and an old man in a long black robe, and her wriggling madly, screaming, trying to get away from him.

How she came to this place from Ireland she could not remember, apart from a vague recollection of appearing before a severe looking man who spoke in words she could not understand and who sent her away. She could not remember what she had done to warrant being taken away, being eleven years of age or thereabouts, but did accept that she had, on several occasions, stolen things. She could not remember if her mother was there when she was taken aboard the ship. Once, in the middle of the ocean, an image, more angel than mother, floated above the ship. She was on that ship forever, one of twenty or so young women - girls most of them - at the mercy of the men. She could not remember arriving, so famished, so utterly sick was she. She remembered waking one night and seeing nothing. Out of the blackness she cried, *Merciful Mother Mary, help me*. That blackness would visit her often afterwards but it was never black enough to blot out the bad things, like the things that happened on the passage out to the new world. She remembered no details, only that she was helpless, a young woman hardly more than a girl, at the mercy of rough men who used her to gratify their crude impulses and left her sore and battered, staring up at the stars.

Oh, Holy Mother Mary, weep for little Molly Doolan.

She told Mabel once, as they sat one day under the fig tree at the tides edge, how she had woken one morning to find herself in total darkness, with the sound of sleeping people all around. She was in a building, lying on a bed of straw with a thin blanket over her. When the dawn came she saw that she was in a large stone building with narrow windows high up through which weak beams of light came through the gloom. It was the Women's Prison. She stayed there for many weeks, only occasionally venturing out into the light where a strange and powerful sun beat down. She accepted the dreadful food and the tight-lipped attention of the guards. Until she was summoned and introduced to a couple by the name of Piper, for whom she was to provided domestic service.

They were dreadful people Mabel, the Pipers. I was nothing but a slave to them.

At the shore with Mabel she watched a ship pass by, smoke billowing from its tall dark funnels. They watched until it disappeared over the horizon then she turned to Mabel and said, Some times I see the boats leaving - like that one out there - and wish that I was on one, going back. But I have no idea what I'd be going back to. We should be thankful and pray to God I suppose.

One day Molly Doolan was alone on the veranda gazing idly across the common when a tall black man walked past. He was old, around her age, and dressed in working clothes. There was something about the way he carried himself that reminded Molly of the black man called Jacky back at The Pine. As her eyes followed the tall dark figure towards the shore visions came to her of that time by the river. She was there, standing by the water and he was coming to her with his arms extended and she was anticipating the embrace. Only the vision faded and she saw that the man had gone. Was it him, she asked herself. It could not be of course. Not after all those years. Was she, broken in body and mind, finally succumbing to the general madness that pervaded the asylum.

She saw the same black man several times after that but her mind had gone and she could never tell whether it was for real that she saw the man or whether it was

in visions, for the visions came more and more frequently and even Mabel found talking to her difficult.

There was no sudden end to Molly Doolans life, only a gradual fading into oblivion and burial in the soft earth of the cemetery that overlooked the bay. Only her friend Mabel mourned her passing. Molly Doolans name was recorded in the register of the asylum but was otherwise forgotten.

I stop and look at Mary. She is holding back tears.

You OK, I ask.

She wipes her eye.

That's a sad story Will. Children taken away...

It's only a story, Mary.

We sit for a while saying nothing. I ask if she'd like a drink. She shakes her head, says she'd better be going.

I go with her to the street. At her car we stop. She opens the door. We kiss goodbye.

Back in my apartment I make a hasty pasta dish, pour myself a wine and sit mulling over the day just past. Such revelations! I have no idea what I should do, keep churning options over in my mind but nothing sticks. And there's the manuscript. I worry that I haven't captured the spirit of the bonyi ceremony, or whether such a thing is possible. I'm all mixed up and in a bad mood, unable to decide whether to go to bed or just get drunk when the phone rings.

It's Gary Lee!

Whatcha up to Will, he asks.

I say nothing much.

I'm in town, he says. Late meeting. Just finished. Mind if I come over for a bit?

He comes in, looking as young as ever (he's one of those people who never seem to age), apologises for calling so late and hands me a bottle of red. I open it and we sit.

Ran into Bill the other day, he says. He told me that you are writing a book and that it's something to do with bora rings...

Well not exactly Gary...

Anyway, there's one near my place at Samford. Guess you know it. Went there the other day with a fellow from the uni. He's doing some research into Aboriginal ceremonial life. Or something... I'm supposed to be providing legal advice. Thought you'd be interested.

I'm not sure how to respond.

So, he says after a long silence, what is this book about?

I tell him I've been reading it to Mary Wright.

Shit, he exclaims, Mary bloody Wright. God, you two together again!

No Gary. I'm just seeing her. She's not well. Cancer.

He goes quiet.

I saw her today, I say. In fact she left not long before you rang.

Gary is quiet.

Told me something...

Something?

Yes, told me she had a child...

Didn't know that, he says. She played around a bit, didn't she? Bit of a party girl...

I give Gary a withering look.

Sorry, he says. Didn't know you ...

The child is mine Gary.

I'm stunned by my own words, but it's out.

Jesus Will...

I tell Gary what Mary had told me. He listens without interrupting. When I finish he does something unexpected; he embraces me. We stand for a long time. I want to cry but can't.

Some day, I say, breaking away.

Some day indeed, he says.

It's getting late but I open another bottle of red. Why not?

It's funny, I say after downing maybe a half glass, but there are parallels between the story I'm telling Mary and my own life. I'm thinking of combining both stories into one.

Sounds interesting, he says. How?

Dunno, I say. Problem is the last bit I read is a bit different. Can't think of any parallels in my life.

It's the wine. Suddenly I want to talk about my book. Maybe it's a way out.

What's this bit, he asks.

I tell him about my efforts to describe the bonyi festival and how I can't think of a similar event in my life.

Read me a bit, he says.

I read a bit.

He interrupts, asks if I remember our trip to Berri

Berri?

Yeah, Berri. South Australia. Down to Earth festival. 1979. Dunno why, but it seems to me that was a bit like your bonyi festival. White fella tribal gathering. Wasn't supposed to be Anglos only, but that's what it was; a bullshit Anglo wank!

I tell him he's being a bit harsh, but that, anyway, I can't quite see the connection between the two.

Both are - were - festivals, he says. Both down to earth...

It was Easter, 1979. Not long back from London I ran into Gary Lee who was heavily involved in the ALP and a great supporter of Jim Cairns, then Opposition spokesman for finance in the Federal Parliament. Cairns was mixed up in the Down to Earth movement (among other things) and would be speaking at the Down to Earth festival in Berri, South Australia. Down to Earth was an offshoot of the ConFest movement that had originated in San Francisco. Gary talked me into taking a few days off work and going with him to hear Cairns, and to experience a bit of alternative culture.

It's early in the morning, the traffic light as we drive out of the city and on through Ipswich, piles of black coal visible from the road, singing Ewan McColl's Dirty old town as we motor on through the rich undulating country of the Fassifern valley and into increasingly broken country below the escarpment of the Great Dividing Range, going up the long winding climb to Cunningham's Gap, rainforest closing in, windows wound down, cool air flowing in, weird bird calls coming from deep in the forest, motoring through the rolling countryside of the southern downs through Warwick and Stanthorpe and onto the New England Highway, tall roadside poplars turning yellow, other exotic trees turning red, the air so chill we wind the windows up, going past the old Wallangarra railway station where the narrow gauge trains from Brisbane met the standard gauge trains from Sydney, across the border into New South Wales motoring through Tenterfield, Glen Innis and Armidale, rolling down the famous Moombies where, legend had it, semis in angle gear sent drivers into heavenly territory, winding through Tamworth and on towards Gunnedah, grain silos rising against the early afternoon sky, on through the western plains to Dubbo and Parkes where, exhausted, we stop for the night in a wayside truckstop, sleeping impossible because of semis coming and going, vaguely wondering what it might be like driving those rigs all hours of the day and night, heading off early, picking up a hitch-hiker, a Kamilaroi man from Brewarrina who says his name is Sidney and he's going to Berri for the fruit picking, who is pleased when we say we're off to Berri also, but not so pleased when we tell him why, Gary trying to explain the whole Con Fest/Down to Earth movement and how it's about overthrowing the established order and gaining equality for everyone, Sidney replying that it sounds like bullshit to him, that there was no such thing as equality and there had to be someone in charge, that us white blokes are full of shit, which doesn't go down well with Gary and I'm telling Sidney I've read about his country and the stone bora grounds but he's not inclining to follow that up and we're driving on in silence along the Newell Highway to West Wyalong, stopping for coffee before the long stretch through Rankin's Springs with its weird-looking silos like giant African kraals and on across the Hay Plains, hot dry wind blowing across flat and

treeless plains, watery mirages and 360 degree horizons of no trees and great empty plains of saltbush, Gary saying there's nothing out there, Sidney saying that land's not empty pal, that there are ghosts out there, and I'm seeing vague shapes that do seem to dance in the distance like spirit figures from another reality, Gary saying they're just whirlwinds kicking up dust, Sidney saying nothing's just 'just', that everything is related to something and he going into a long ramble about spirit people, Gary and I not knowing how to respond, driving on through Balranald and into Mildura, breathing in the cooling humidity of irrigated orchards and vineyards, water spraying everywhere as if there was an endless supply, turned the corner at the Grand Hotel and heading out along the dead straight Sturt Highway to Renmark and Berri, dropping Sidney off at the pub where he says his mates are waiting, following the signs to the Down to Earth site, parking the car and walking in to the dusty fairground, naked and near-naked people wandering about among the hippy crowd, blokes with shirts and no bottoms, dicks swinging proudly, me muttering show-offs, Gary's laughing, saying it takes all sorts, finding a spot near the river and rolling out our sleeping bags and it's four o'clock and still hot, us stinking from all those hours on the road, standing at the river's edge about to dive in, a big bloke with tattooed arms saying wouldn't advise it lads too many silly buggers have drowned in this river and it's the first time ever I've been addressed as 'lad', Gary mumbling South Australian and we're swimming across the gentle flow, standing on the opposite bank looking back across the river to the Down to Earth site and its chaotic assortment of tents and makeshift shelters scattered among the gums and people wandering aimlessly about, Gary saying if this is the great movement for social change I'll be fucked, swimming back and joining the crowd, walking past fortune tellers and circles of men and women singing folk songs from the sixties, story-tellers, stalls selling hippy wares and home-grown produce and packets of pot, children playing tag, buskers singing Dylan songs from years back, a group of older women with no clothes on but plenty of beads calling out weird sounds, notice boards covered in posters advertising homebirths, Small Scale Energy, Eckankar the ancient science of soul travel, magic workshops, healing workshops, exploring the ideal self workshops,

witchcraft and alternative medicine classes, birthing advice, a café called *The Osmotic Milkbottle*, Chinese Healing workshops, naked women giving massages to equally naked men, wondering out loud who these people think they're kidding, Gary's saying don't be such a prude Will, a bloke wearing a white t-shirt and nothing else walking towards us cock half aroused, Gary's muttering fuckwit just a little too loud, the bloke stopping and turning but we're moving on fast, Gary chuckling to himself and we're at a kind of sound shell, a small band playing on a makeshift stage, singer singing folk songs, and it's night and we're with a small group of people eating barbecued organic sausages and drinking cheap wine, fire blazing and smoke rising, music in the air, chatting to an older bloke and his pretty daughter from a farm in the Mallee, him telling a long story about how hard it is to make ends meet and how his daughter is going to uni in Adelaide and how she is going to be a teacher, the farmer a fan of Jim Cairns, which Gary says is unusual for a cocky and he starts on about politics and socialism and Gary is prodding me saying it's time for bed and it's the next day and we are in a crowd listening to the much-anticipated speech from Jim Cairns, Gary is all ears but the speech wears boringly on full of overblown rhetoric and absurd visions of an unlikely human paradise, someone Cairns didn't even stay at the site, that each night he'd de-camp to his hotel in Berri and it's all too much for Gary who's mood changes, turning to me saying mate this is rubbish and we're packing up and driving out of town wondering about the black man Sidney who's probably out among the vines earning cash and we're back on the Sturt Highway, the land undulating and bare, native pines on the sand ridges, dry scrub along the verges, single stunted trees out in ploughed paddocks of red earth, neither of us speaking, our minds in some other space, passing through Lake Cullulleraine and on to Mildura, stopping for a beer at the Grand Hotel before heading back out across the Hay Plains and it's night time, the headlights of trucks coming at us from miles away so that even at a combined speed of 220 kilometres an hour it takes ages for our lights to merge out there on the flat unending plains, stopping at Rankin's Springs for a brief sleep before heading off early in the morning going through West Wyalong and the Western plains, stopping for lunch at Forbes before heading off through Parkes and

Dubbo and on to Gilgandra, the country becoming green, on through Coonabarabran, the Warrumbungles topped with heavy cloud, lightning along the ridges, glimpses of telescopes along the tops, on through Gunnedah and Tamworth and back up the Moombies to high Uralla, the poplars more yellow than before, on through the night, cold Armidale, Glen Innis and Tenterfield, crossing the border to Stanthorpe, stopping one last time, spending a cold night by the side of a the road before rising in the cold dawn and driving on through Warwick, the ramparts of the Great Dividing Range before us, tops hidden by thick cumulus cloud, going through cool rainforest of Cunningham's Gap and down the steep hill to the warm humid plains and on through Ipswich to the crowded western road into Brisbane.

I understand what you're saying Gary, but I'm not sure I'd push the comparison too far.

Well, he says, from what you've told me it seems you are making those comparisons.

I'm too tired to respond. It's been a long day.

You look rooted Will, he says. Guess it's time to go.

He's gone. I'm alone with my thoughts. Grace! I still can't come to grips with this. Grace, I whisper. Grace! What does it mean? My wine glass is still half full. I should be in bed but I stay up, sipping wine.

9

It was chilly this morning; the radio reporting frosts in some suburbs and a light snow to the ranges around Stanthorpe. There are winter mornings like these; when the early cold turns into fine clear days of warm sunshine. Days like these are why we put up with the humidity of summer. It's fine and warm now, a perfect day for a walk. Which is what I'm about to do when the phone rings. To my great surprise it's George. He tells me Mary is back in hospital and that she'd like to see me. Then he wishes me a cordial good day and hangs up!

Funny, but for a moment there I feel a need to meet this George.

At the hospital I find her back in the ward she was in the first time I visited. She looks drained. Cancer is an evil thing; offering moments of false hope followed by lows. She looks miserable. I kiss her on one sunken cheek and sit beside her. I don't know what to say.

She breaks the silence, tells me things aren't looking great, that the cancer has spread.

Don't know how long...

She trails off. I tell her she's fought the thing before and that she'll do it again. She shrugs; a gesture of helplessness.

We sit in silence for what seems a long time. I'm thinking all sorts of thoughts, but none hold for long. I think of my mother on her deathbed, and how similar in age Mary now is to what my mother was when she was dying. I think of Grace and wonder if I'll ever meet her. Or if I want to! I think about my declining life and the colonoscopy I have coming up. I think about how short life is, and how unpredictable it can be.

Bugger it, Will, she says, stop moping. I'm the sick one.

Want to hear a joke I say. I'm not sure why I say this; I'm not really in the mood.

Sure Will, she says without too much enthusiasm.

Irish guy, I say, is visiting Brisbane. He's broke and needs to pay for a return flight home. He's tried several places looking for temporary work but hasn't had any luck. Anyway, he's walking along this day when he comes to a lumber yard. He stops and peers in through the main gate. There are men working there; stacking, cutting, sorting. It's a hive of activity. Ah, he says to himself, maybe I'll give this place a go. So he walks in, goes right in past the workers and comes to the foreman's office. He takes a deep breath, opens the door and goes in. The foreman's there at his desk, head down, sweating over paperwork. The foreman's a big red-headed guy who's worked his way up. He doesn't like paperwork. Anyway, he looks up and there's this strange bloke standing there. Normally people don't walk in without knocking, and anyway, he's not seen this chap before, wonders if he's some new hand he hasn't had a chance to meet. The Irishman stands there, not sure what to say. Yes, says the foreman angrily, what can I do you. I'll be looking for work, says the Irishman in a broad brogue. The foreman's a bit taken aback. He's got all this bloody paperwork, which is pretty well literally giving him the shits and here's some off the street bloke wanting work. You can't just walk in asking for work, the foreman splutters. We advertise; do things the proper way. Ah, says the Irishman, but I'd be desperate. Can't you be giving me a try man. The foreman's a bit mad by this time but doesn't quite know what to do. The Irishman's standing there and doesn't look like moving. And anyway, they are too busy out in the yard to call anyone to take this Irish bloke away. The foreman holds his head in his hands in exasperation – not just because of the Irishman but things in general. Finally he raises his head – the Irishman's still there – and says, listen mate, I'll give you a test and if you pass I'll give you go. Labouring. Week's trial. OK. Ah, sure, says the Irishman, that'd be fine. Well, says the foreman, this is a lumber yard, OK? To be sure, says the Irishman, a lumber yard. Well, says the foreman, what's the difference between a girder and a joist. Ah, that'd be easy, says the Irishman, Goethe wrote Faust; Joyce wrote Ulysses!

Very funny, she says. But she doesn't laugh.

Goethe was...

I know Will. I'm not as stupid as you think.

She looks hurt.

Anyway, I say to break the tension, How are things in this flash hotel.

She laughs weakly, says the room service is average but the bar is never open.

I laugh. It's hard work entertaining the sick.

How's the manuscript Will, she asks after another long silence.

Finished, I say. I think.

Well, she says, maybe it's time for one last edit.

I find the page where I'd left off last time and begin.

Desperately tired and hungry Jabiru goes back to The Pine. But even as he opens the gate he'd helped erect all that long time ago and enters the run he knows he's made a mistake. He's about to turn away when James Bolan rides up on a fine looking horse.

Jabiru! Old friend, he exclaims. Where have you been?

Jabiru looks up at James Bolan astride the horse and sees a different man. He has thickened, looks just like all the other landowners with his well-fed body, his sturdy clothes and his carefully trimmed beard and ruddy cheeks. Jabiru cannot find the right words.

James Bolan notes the black man's misery.

Are you all right Jabiru?

I am good, Mister Bolan.

I'm glad you're back, Jabiru. Sid could do with some help.

Jabiru stands beside Bolan's horse, struggling with emotions he can hardly contain.

At last the words Jabiru sought come tumbling out. Molly, is she...?

James Bolan looks away. His horse suddenly takes fright and rears up. James Bolan fights to regain control. For a good horseman like James Bolan this is disconcerting. James Bolan steadies the horse, steadies himself, looks to his old friend. What can he say to the black man's question?

Is she all right? Jabiru mumbles.

James Bolan dismounts, stands beside his old friend.

Molly? Don't know Jabiru. She went to town. I think she is working there. That's all I know.

James Bolan remembers the time by the river sitting with Jabiru, how Bolan had wondered aloud at his own fortune and the inexplicable ways of the world. That had been a special time. He hasn't met anyone since who he has felt as close to. He looks at his one-time friend and wonders why it has to be this way.

Come, the white man says, we'll put on a billy.

James Bolan turns the horse and the two men walk on towards the homestead. As they approach the house James Bolan sees Eliza standing on the veranda, one hand shading her eyes, the other holding the hands of a young boy. The child is small and pale looking. To one side, slightly behind in the veranda's shade, stands another child. This boy, of a similar age and size, is dark-skinned. The look on Eliza Bolan's face says Jabiru is not wanted.

The two men stand out in the yard. The sun beats down.

What can James Bolan say? How can he explain the past months; the virtual adoption of the dark child Jack as companion to their own frail Andrew, the disappointment in Molly as Eliza becomes more and more possessive of the child, the growing bitterness in Molly and, finally, her leaving for the town...

Come, says James Bolan, shaking off these troubling thoughts, we'll have a cuppa.

They go over to the fireplace where Jabiru, Sid, Billy and King had spent so many nights yarning around the fire, sipping billy tea. James Bolan gets the fire going and a pot boiling. They sit sipping from hot metal mugs.

Sid, says Jabiru after a long pause. How is he?

Oh he's still around, James replies. Hale and hearty. Still strong as an ox. Not here at the moment. In town getting supplies. Taken the dray. Be away for a bit I'm afraid.

Jabiru looks to where Eliza and the two children had stood. They have gone. He fights conflicting emotions. That young dark child he saw on the veranda...

Jabiru looks at the man who was once his boss, maybe even his friend, follows his gaze across in the country to the Glasshouses and, beyond them, the distant pale blue hills of the Bonyis. Something good has passed away and is irrecoverable. The world is closing in. All the optimism he'd felt that long-ago day he'd left his island shore, all the high hopes he'd carried to the bora...all gone. Right here, standing beside James Bolan, Jabiru feels lower than he's ever felt. His people are doomed. He is doomed.

James Bolan looks towards the distant hills, also fighting conflicting emotions. He knows he will incur Eliza's wrath if he keeps the black man on, but the man – his old friend – is here. What can he do?

Why don't you go over to the kitchen Jabiru, he says eventually. Get some tucker. Got some business to attend to. Be back in a jiffy. Maybe work something out.

No Mr Bolan. I am going home. Maybe get some work with the fishermen on the bay.

Why, James Bolan says, suddenly brightening, I have a friend you should see. Jock Campbell. He has a fishing boat at Wynnum. He's always looking for help. Tell him I sent you. He's a good man Jabiru. I'll get word to him that you are coming.

Goodbye Mr Bolan.

Jabiru, wait! Looks like you could do with a decent pair of boots. I've got some that'll fit.

James Bolan goes inside, returns with the boots and a large shoulder bag containing bread, flour, tea, sugar, some preserves Eliza has made, a billy can and a few old utensils.

And here, adds James Bolan, is some fishing gear I don't need.

He hands Jabiru a bag of fishing tackle, and his second rod.

And I think some of your clothes are still in the shed. Take them.

James Bolan turns and trudges towards the house. He goes into his office, closes the door and stands in the gloom with his guilt. He cannot believe the way he's acted. He is a successful farmer. He employs people. He is respected. Yet he is a

coward. It's wrong that Jabiru had not been told about the baby. James Bolan sits at his desk, head on his hands.

Eliza Bolan, in the kitchen feeling her own guilt, stirs stew and wondering about her stubborn disposition and her lack of compassion. That black man Jacky, or whatever his real name was, she says to herself, And Molly...they were innocents. She looks out the window, watches the black man who was once her husbands friend walk away. She too knows that something good has passed.

Jabiru goes away from The Pine, a strange sight indeed with his near new boots and his clean clothes, bulging canvas bag over his shoulder and a long fishing rod in one hand. He walks on through low swampy country interspersed with creeks and shallow pools of water. All afternoon he travels until, with the sun almost gone, weary of limb and mind, he makes camp beside a small and brackish stream. He gathers dry wood and makes a fire. He does not cook from this fire, instead he eats greedily from the food provided by James Bolan. It's a long time since he has eaten fresh bread and, before he can stop himself, he has consumed most of what has been provided, leaving less than half the bread, a small bag of flour, a carefully wrapped lump of salted pork and three small jars of preserves. His hunger sated he gathers dry rushes and grass and makes himself a bed. He considers boiling a billy but is too tired. He lies on the soft bed staring up at the star clouded sky and, eventually, falls asleep.

From a line of fires white smoke curls up into the black night sky. The figures come out of the smoke, figures from old dreams he is by now familiar with. They come stomping towards him, stomping and stomping, with each step raising little clouds of dust. They come stomping towards him, yet never getting closer. He is frightened of them, these haunted figures covered in down. He wants them to come on, to end whatever it is, but the figures fade. He is at the edge of a ravine. From across the ravine a line of men stand signalling him to him. Come, they seem to say, and he tries to go to them but the ravine is deep and he is tangled in vines. They cling to him. He is trapped, fighting for a way out. He is free, wandering through a land he does not know. He comes to a clearing. A light from some unseen source casts

shadows of trees across the space. He goes into the centre of the space. There are men lying on the ground, twisted in awful shapes, horrible fire devils stream from their open mouths, swirling into smoke that envelops him and he is fighting against the clinging smoke, running towards a tower with arms like blades. Hanging from the arms are figures of men, dark against the white painted walls of the tower. The arms are turning and the figures are flying out, flying into the sky.

He wakes from the nightmare, thrashing on the ground. He sits up. He is sweating, although the night is cool and damp. It's dark still. The stars have gone. He shivers. He is alone in this place of dark tree shapes and still water, haunted by after images of the dream that will not go away. The moon comes out. It shines on the still water. A fish breaks the surface in a small shower of light. It's a small miracle. He lies back, settles into the soft bed he had made and sleeps.

He wakes to a clear sky. A light dew covers the ground and there is a slight breeze from the southeast. He licks the dew. It's sweet. He re-kindles the fire and with the tea and sugar that James Bolan provided makes a sweet billy tea. It is good. His spirits lift. He will get to the bay and meet this Jock Campbell and if he doesn't he'll cross to his old island home where, he hopes, his people will welcome him.

At the edge of a dark ti-tree forest west of Boondall he meets a small group of Oondumbi people. There's an elder who, by the look of the scars across his back and shoulders, was once a formidable warrior; two older women (one partially crippled); two young women (one in poor health); a young uninitiated man with a bitter expression, and a boy with a gammy foot. None wear footwear of any description. The elder carries a spear and a waddy and has around his neck a band of shells. Stuck into his hide belt are some ancient tools. They are the only proper weapons among the group. The women carry dilly bags and wear dirty shapeless cotton dresses. The young man wears a shirt and a pair of long trousers tattered at the ankles. The older boy who carries a long stick and wears an old waistcoat and nothing else.

The elder asks Jabiru where he is going.

Jabiru says he is going down to the bay where he hopes to find work with the fishermen.

And which way will you be going, asks the elder.

That way. Jabiru indicates the general direction of the river. I am going to cross the river there.

Pinkenba, the elder muses. That will be difficult. There are many creeks and much swampy ground. Hidden traps. You will find the going hard.

Besides, the elder added after a short pause, that land is full of ghosts.

And the river is wide and full of sharks, adds the young man. Why not go through the town. You can cross the river there more easily.

Jabiru says he doesn't want to go through the town.

Got trouble there, says the cheeky boy. Might you end up on rope?

The boy makes an exaggerated hanging gesture and, for his troubles, gets a clip over the ear from one of the women.

Well, then, if you must go that way, says the elder, go by the mission. Which is that way.

Jabiru follows the elder's pointing hand to a line of low wooded hill to the southwest.

You will come to cleared ground, the elder says, with a wire fence. There is a gate. Go through. You will be made welcome. They are Germans. They will give you food and drink.

And religion, if you are not careful, puts in the young man, to much merriment among the others.

But they are good people, adds the crippled women, who will not refuse you.

But first, says the elder, I will show you something. Come!

Jabiru follows the old man and the cheeky boy into a paperbark forest. They go along an overgrown path until they come to a lagoon rimmed by lily plants. Sunlight plays on the water, contrasting with the shadows of the darkly circling paperbarks. Jabiru stops. He looks out over the lilies to the dark waters in the centre of the lagoon. The water looks deep. Something stirs there. Whatever it is seems to call softly to Jabiru.

Come in, the water whispers.

Water no good, the elder says, seeing Jabiru's discomfort. Come away quick.

Jabiru tears himself away from the water spirit, follows the elder to a large ring of earth. It's like the ring of his bora, except it's overgrown and neglected. Saplings sprout from within the ring and the path that once led from it to the sacred ring has been ploughed over by the white men. They stand at the ring's edge.

This was a scared place, the elder says. One day white men came and cleared the land all about. They ploughed over the path and planted crops, leaving only this.

The elder sweeps his hand over the ring.

Which, he adds, is sacred no more. There are not enough of us left now to rebuild. There will be no more boras. Soon we will all be gone.

The young man spits contemptuously at the ground. I curse the white men, he says, who took away my life.

The old man puts an arm around the youths shoulder.

This boy looked forward to the bora, he says. He wanted to follow his brother who was a warrior. But his brother is dead from white man's disease. Now he has the disease. And we have no future. The white man has a god who, they say, is merciful. There is no mercy here. But we must not hold you. I wanted you to see this place. Go to the Germans now. They are not like the others. Say that we sent you.

Jabiru goes to where he has been directed and stands by an iron gate in a rough fence of hardwood posts and barbed wire. Beyond the fence several men are labouring in a newly ploughed paddocks under the hot sun. The whole of the sloping hillside is marked out in plots, some with young fruit trees, some with vegetables. Some of the land is fallow. A tall bearded man in a dark cloak comes down from the buildings and opens the gate. Jabiru steps through. The man offers his hand, which Jabiru duly shakes.

Wilkommen, the man says in the language of Otto the German.

Jabiru acknowledges the welcome, then, disconcerted by the man's steady gaze and odd smile, blurts out, I am Jabiru. I was told that I might get food...

The man smiles a kindly smile, says in faltering English, Go to those building up there. Say that Pastor Eipper sent you. You will be given what you need. I will follow shortly.

Jabiru thanks the man called Eipper and walks up the hill to a sturdy wooden building where two men stand talking animatedly in the shade of a wide veranda. One man is short and rotund and dressed in a dull black cloak. The other man is tall and slim and dressed in travelling clothes. So engrossed are they in their conversation that they do not at first notice the black man standing patiently in the shadows.

Jabiru moves closer.

Ah! the shorter of the two men says, turning towards Jabiru, um entschuldigung...

That language again!

I... I am Jabiru, the black man utters. I...

Ah! English, the short man says. The language of the colony. I will never get used to it. I am Pastor Schmidt. And this, indicating the tall man, is Doctor Leichhardt.

The tall man steps forward and puts out his hand. Jabiru extends his hand. The man called Doctor takes Jabiru's hand and shakes it vigorously, and at length. All the while the tall German's intense eyes stare down at Jabiru from beneath a broad brimmed hat. For some time Jabiru holds that gaze, until, discomforted by its intensity, and wondering if it is a habit of these strange people to look so on others, looks away.

The Doctor turns to Pastor Schmidt and begins an earnest conversation in German. Jabiru cannot comprehend a word they say, despite his time with Otto the German.

The short man turns to Jabiru. The Doctor, he says, is an explorer. He is going to the interior...

The man called Doctor Leichhardt nods briefly.

Pastor Schmidt, sweeping his small feminine hand westward towards the mountains, says in a soft voice, Doctor Leichhardt would like to know; will you go with him.

For a moment Jabiru is confused. What, he wonders, is the man asking of him. Then, comprehending the question says, in English somewhat better than the German's, that he has already been into the interior and that he has no intention of going back there.

I am going home, Jabiru adds. To the island. It is a long way. I have little food. That man down there, adds Jabiru, indicating the form of Pastor Eipper, who, at this moment is approaching up the hill, said you might give me some food for the way.

Pastor Schmidt, chastened, smiles. Come, follow me, he offers.

They go into a kitchen smelling of freshly baked bread. Pastor Schmidt gathers a loaf of bread and other victuals and places them in a cloth bag.

Here, he says to Jabiru, are some provisions. Is there anything else that I can do for you?

Jabiru shakes his head, thanks Pastor Schmidt and turns to leave but is stopped by the explorer Leichhardt, who stands across his path.

And so... the explorer asks, you are...?

Jabiru. I am Jabiru. As I said.

And you are from?

Christopher Eipper, arriving on the scene and sensing the black man's discomfort, interposes.

You cannot have him Doctor. He has his own plans.

That is a great pity, says the explorer, for he is a fine specimen.

Specimen Doctor! Is he not a human being?

The Doctor utters a dismissive snort.

If that is all, interposes Pastor Schmidt, then we shall say goodbye and good luck. God be with you Jabiru.

Jabiru goes from the mission with his bag of fresh supplies and bewilderment at the ways of the white men. The tall German was unlike any other man he'd met; not amongst the English speaking, nor the Germans. Apart perhaps, he thinks as he walks away, the old man who took him to the bora.

And, once again, Jabiru is perplexed.

He crosses low swampy country beyond Hendra, skirts the mangrove shrouded waters of the Serpentine and comes at last to the river at Pinkenba. The river here is wide and deep. It is evening and too late to attempt a crossing. Jabiru makes camp on the bank. He assembles James Bolan's fishing gear and, with this, catches three small fish from a shallow pool left by the receding tide. On a drift of sand exposed by a previous high tide he cooks the fish over a fire made from driftwood and rushes. His hunger assuaged and his thirst quenched with tea made from fresh water from a nearby soak he lies down by the dying fire. The night is cool. He has only the clothes he wears. He gathers more rushes, pulls them over him and drifts into an uneasy sleep. The dreams come, as they so often do these days, but they are remote and h

e is a mere observer, unthreatened and distant. He sleeps on through the night.

Dawn comes cool and foggy. Jabiru stands at the water's edge, staring out into the gloom, wondering how he might cross that wide and shark-infested stream. There's a shape out there in the swirling fog, coming closer, and there's a soft sound of distant voices. Only Jabiru isn't sure. He remembers the old Oondumbi man saying that the land was full of ghosts, and it's true that on his difficult passage through the mangrove swamps Jabiru had indeed been frightened more than once by unexpected and unexplainable sounds and movements. Now, here, in the foggy river, something unknown lurks. He is about to turn away when he hears the voices more clearly. They are not ghosts, but men out on the water, talking in an accent Jabiru does not know.

Hello! he calls out into the fog.

Hello! comes an echoing call.

I want to cross over, Jabiru yells. Can you help?

Hang on there matey. Were coming in.

A small wooden boat with two fishermen on board appears out of the thinning fog.

Where are you off to then, asks the larger of the two men.

Wynnum, answers Jabiru.

Hop on then mate. We're going across.

Name's Angus, offers the big man as soon as Jabiru is seated. And this, he adds, indicating the second man, is Robert.

And yours, the man called Angus asks.

Jabiru is in two minds; should he tell these strange men his real name, or should he stick with 'Jacky'.

Aye, says Robert, turning to his companion, the man's shy.

Let him take his time Robert, says Angus, who is now at the oars and rowing hard.

Jabiru, the black man says as the boats heads out from the shore. My name is Jabiru.

And a fine name that is, isn't it Robert?

It is, says Robert. A fine Scottish name! Welcome aboard Jabiru.

Jabiru sails across the wide river in the company of two jolly Scotsmen. As they go the fog lifts to reveal a bright blue sky. The breeze off the wide river freshens. The river surface, smooth to begin with, comes alive. The boat rocks and rolls through small waves. Angus begins to sing. Robert joins in. Jabiru cannot understand the words but the tune has a lilting air.

These two fishermen are at ease with the world. Jabiru's spirits lift.

And what, Robert asks as they near the further shore, will you be doing at Wynnum Jabiru.

Maybe help with the fishing, says Jabiru. Maybe see a man called Mister Campbell.

Ah, Jock, says Angus. And how do you know Jock, the fisherman asks.

Mister Bolan. He said...

Bolan, says Robert. Know anyone by that name Angus?

Has a familiar ring, says Angus. Can't say I know the person.

But Jock... Mister Campbell... He's all right, says Robert. Has a boat. Old whaler it is, rigged for sail. Can't miss it. Gunwales painted green.

Guns! exclaims Jabiru.

The two Scotsmen exchange questioning looks.

Ah, says Robert, gunwales! This, he adds, patting the side of his boat, is a gunwale. Green it is. On the boat you'll be looking for that is.

Jabiru mouths the word: cun-all. He'll look for a boat with a green cun-all.

The boat slides onto a drift of sandy silt and the three men step ashore.

Three men on the shore of a broad river; one short and stocky and of a pinkish hue, one tall and strongly built and white of skin, and one, the tallest of the three, dark skin shining in the early light. Behind them the land rises heavy timbered. High above this hill a sea eagle circles in the blue. From out of the fringing mangroves along the shore come the whistling calls of unknown birds.

Go over that hill laddie, says Angus, pointing up. From the top you should be able to see the bay.

Not that we've ever been that way, says Robert. Landlubbers we aint. But Wynnum's there somewhere.

If Jock's about give him our regards, adds Angus.

Aye, and all the best lad, says Robert, sticking out his hand.

They shake, the three of them, and say their good byes. The two Scotsmen push their boat out into the river. Jabiru watches the boat's progress until it is a small thing in the vastness of the river, then turns and walks away.

Wynnum is a few rough iron and slab-wood shacks beside a tidal creek. Two fishing boats lie tipsy on the muddy banks. There's no one around. Jabiru follows the creek bank to its mouth and stands gazing out across the bay. It's quiet, just the sound of small waves on the muddy beach, and the cries of sea birds. Beyond the mangroves, past the last mud flat, beyond the last of the low islands, he sees the soft blue outline of his island home. He stands lost in thought. For a long time he stands

there recalling the time he'd crossed the bay with the old man. So long ago! He wonders about going home after all this time.

He is in the process of assembling his fishing gear when a boat approaches from out in the bay with two men on board, one dark skinned, the other sun-darkened in the way of white men who've spent time out on the water. The dark man lowers the sail and the other begins to row. Jabiru watches as the boat comes slowly on. It's a whaler with green painted gunwales. The boat draws level and the dark man, now at the prow with anchor rope ready, waves to Jabiru.

And in that instant the two dark men recognise each other.

The boat is beached and tied and Coochin comes running.

Jabiru, he calls as he comes. Jabiru!

The two black men embrace.

The white man comes walking up to them, a perplexed look on his broad bearded face.

Jock, says Coochin, stepping aside for the approaching white man, this is my friend Jabiru.

Pleased to meet you lad, says the white man. Names Jock by the way. Jock Campbell.

Jabiru shakes Jock Campbell's hand. Jock says it's time for a cuppa and a bit of tucker. From the boat Jock hauls out a box wrapped in a wet Hessian bag.

Keeps things cool, he says.

Over tea and damper Coochin relates to Jock his meeting with Jabiru at the bonyi, and Jabiru tells of his journey to Wynnum, including his passage across the river with the two Scotsmen.

A small world it is for sure, says Jock; that you should meet up with those two lads. Surprised they didn't kidnap you Jabiru!

Near be kidnapped by Mister Lightheart, says Jabiru with a grin.

Ah, Leichhardt, says Jock Campbell with a laugh. The German explorer! Word gets around these parts.

Jabiru tells of the explorer's plan to go out into the heart of the country and how he wanted Jabiru to join him.

Might be nothing out there to find, says Jock.

Except maybe death, Jabiru adds.

And they all laugh.

Jock Campbell puts his arm around Jabiru's shoulder. Come along then, I'll introduce you to my boat.

The three men fish the banks and channels of the southern bay. When the fish are not running or the weather is against them they net the muddy shores and mangrove creeks for crabs. There are times when, anchored off Amity Bank, the urge to see his old mother is strong in Jabiru.

During a trawl along the channel down towards Dunwich they are struck by a sudden squall and forced to run the boat down the lee shore to the sheltered bay just round from the One Mile and sit out the storm.

Morning comes fine and clear, the rain gone.

Good opportunity to catch up with your mother Jabiru, Coochin suggests. I don't know where she is but old One-leg might know. They are friends; him and your mother. Jabiru finds One-leg, who tells him his mother was taken to the Italian mission at Dunwich, along with several others from Amity.

She was sick, you know, adds One-leg. Sick of spirit. She asked after you often but no one knew where you were.

And she is there, asks Jabiru.

Was there, says One-leg. Mission closed. Missionaries from Italy gave up. Couldn't convert no one, he says with a laugh. Went away. Tail between their legs like dogs.

Where is she now, Jabiru asks.

Out along the track, says One-leg, towards Myora.

In the front yard of a shack half way between Dunwich and Myora he sees an old woman. She looks familiar. He stands at the half-open front gate with its broken hinge. It's his mother; a bent old woman almost doubled over from arthritis and poor

of sight. She looks up at the sound of him but shows no sign of recognition. He speaks his childhood name, which was secret to them, and she smiles and he goes up to her and embraces her and she cries briefly then turns away as if he is a stranger and he speaks his name again but she is lost to that past and she turns and walks away.

Back on the boat he says nothing to the others and they don't ask questions.

Jabiru is at Wynnum helping to scrape barnacles off the beached hull of Jock's new ketch when word comes that his mother has died. Jabiru attends to his mother's burial in the little cemetery at Myora. A small crowd of island people are gathered round. A priest from the mainland stands at the head of the grave uttering soft words from the white man's bible from his soft European mouth. Ashes to ashes; dust to dust. Jabiru watches in silence as the mourners recite a prayer about a father in heaven forgiving trespasses. Suddenly Jabiru is holding back tears for there is no heaven and all is lost.

They are out on the Pelican Bank, the three of them. I'm going to Amity, Jabiru says. Build my own place. Maybe do some fishing.

Take the old whaler Jabiru, Jock offers. Got no use for it any more. Might as well have it. It's good for a few years yet. Maybe we can team up at times. Two boats working together... Could be useful...

Jabiru knows the old boat well, has come to see it as almost a living thing. It's big and clumsy but solid and, when in good order, practically unsinkable. With Coochin's help he repairs the old boat and takes it to the island. He builds a shack at Amity and spends his days fishing off the channel. Mostly he is alone but, on calm days when Coochin is with him, they cross the bar and fish the reefs off Frenchman's Beach. When he has a good catch he takes it down to Dunwich to sell. But he never stays long there. There are too many drunken men and battered women in that town. It isn't just the island people; wrecked souls from the hard years of Moreton Bay (convicts and jailors both), old and only partly recovered lepers, and defeated men from failed farms sit on the Benevolent Asylum veranda passing the time. Some wander ghost-like about the place. When he sees the people like this, staring vacantly

out through the fog of their defeated lives, he wonders about the god of the white man.

Returning from a successful days fishing out on the Pelican Bank, Jabiru turns to check his progress shoreward and spies Mary-Ann standing at the waters edge watching his approach. For just an instant an image flashes of Molly standing in the water at The Pine. So strong is that image that, for a moment, he loses concentration and is almost thrown by a small wave that upsets the balance of the boat. Regaining control, he adjusts course for the shore. When he looks again Mary-Ann is wading out to meet him. She steadies the boat and Jabiru jumps out. Together they pull the boat onto the beach. Panting from his exertions he leans on the gunwale and stares across the boat at this woman he has observed from a distance but hardly knows. What he does know is that she is a strong and confident woman known for her stories of the old ways; stories, she tells everyone, she got from her grandmother.

That's a good catch you have there Jabiru, she says, indicating the writing mass of fish in the bottom of the boat. You going to get rid of it all?

Maybe, Jabiru replies. Have to clean them first.

Maybe I'll help. Got nothing else to do.

Jabiru and Mary-Ann set up house in his shack. The shack, added to over the years from materials Jabiru has gathered from shipwrecks, flotsam, leftovers from government buildings and assorted hand-me-downs, becomes the centre of their lives and to a large extent that of the community. It's not just the old people who come to listen to the stories told by both Jabiru and Mary-Ann, but castaways and ex-convicts, Manila men, whalers escaping the lonely and bloody life of the sea, Pacific islanders and lonely men from the mainland; it's a community all mingled and mixed-up, so that it didn't matter where anyone is or was from, or what the colour of their skin is because they are all island people.

It's a time, Mary-Ann will tell to anyone who'll listen, as 'them olden days'.

They were indeed good days. When they were not out fishing, the weather against them, or, increasingly, the urge, Jabiru and Mary-Ann would sit on the veranda looking out over the protected waters of the bay. On summer evenings they'd

watch the storms building up over the bay. At moments like these it seems to Jabiru that all that had gone was like a story out of someone else's life, a distant thing where all the fear and threat had gone. After the hard times and disappointments of his early life Jabiru had found peace with Mary Ann.

Jabiru is on the beach gazing abstractedly out over the channel towards the Amity Banks. It's a watery world he knows well, and one that can be treacherous. It's a fine day. A fresh breeze from the southeast is blowing through the passage. The southern tip of Moreton Island is barely visible through the surf haze. Out of that haze a ship appears from the west. Jabiru is surprised. Most captains have learnt to avoid the unpredictable nature of this passage, preferring the longer and safer way round Cape Moreton, far to the north. But this day is fine, the tide is up and the water is deep. The captain must be confident, Jabiru muses, for he knows that this passage is dangerous and most captains avoid it for the longer way round Cape Moreton. The ship comes on, following the channel that sweeps in close to the shore.

It's the *Sovereign*, the same ship Jabiru had worked on that time at North Quay. Jabiru urges the thing on against the gathering swell, is pleased to see it successfully shudder through two sets of waves. Then, just as it is beating towards the third and final set, as it is about to enter the deep safe waters of the Pacific, it stops.

When he'd seen that ship at the North Quay it had seemed a monstrous thing with its thick wooden planks and its huge paddle wheels and its enormous engine like some panting beast eager to go. But out there, in that gathering surf, it seems small and useless. The great paddle wheels are still. Jabiru sees men on the decks, working frantically to lighten the load, pushing heavy bales of wool overboard, even as the waves come, one after the other to dash across the decks. Tiny figures they are, battling seas that continue to crash mercilessly.

Jabiru watches the drama as if from afar. What he cannot see is the close-up horror, the women and children below deck in cabins awash with foaming water, people climbing out of flooding cabins, stricken men desperately trying to lighten the load. He watched in disbelief as the anchor cables, which for a while there had steadied the ship, give way and the current drives the ship inexorably towards the bar.

News spreads across Amity and beyond. People gather on the shore, looking on helplessly. Dreadful calls carry in fits across the water. There is nothing those on the shore can do but wait, hoping that the vessel will beach itself. There is no point trying to swim out in those seas. The ship strikes the bar. Maybe, Jabiru thinks, it will stop. But a huge swell comes in from the ocean (how slow and majestic it seems; how natural) and the ship is sent all askew out into the deep. There, in a slow swirling motion it slides out along a trough and goes down. There is a brief and uncanny quiet, as if the whole world has stopped. Then, above the muted sound of surf come distant, pitiful human cries. Bales of wool and pieces of wreckage float on the tide.

Jabiru sees the first body, lying like a rag on a bar fifty metres out. Jabiru and two men from the pilot station get it to the shore. A little later they find a woman and a child lying together, dead on the sand. They cover the bodies with sand to keep away the birds then return to the search. All afternoon they work that grim task, until all that can be found are found and the rescuers drift back to their homes, leaving the grim task of dealing with the dead to officials from Brisbane.

It is evening. Two days have passed since the sinking of the *Sovereign*. Jabiru is alone on the veranda, looking out to the quiet waters of the bay. His mind is racing. Questions impossible to answer float teasingly to consciousness then fade away. Why are there so many dead people, how is it that something as solid as a ship like the *Sovereign* can succumb so easily to the forces of nature? Why did Molly Doolan turn away from him? How was it possible that so much could be lost in so little time? What was the bora all about? Beyond all these questions lies a great and unknowable void. Mary-Ann sits down beside him, holds his hand. She murmurs something soft but Jabiru does not respond. Jabiru is off in his own world, she had said to her sister only that afternoon. It's something that is happening more and more these days. She goes inside to prepare the evening meal.

Georgina Bolan is at her desk. It's late afternoon, an unusual time for her to make entries into her journal. But this, she says to herself, is important to record.

18 March 1847

We have just received the most terrible news. The 'Sovereign', that magnificent ship I saw go by only recently, has been wrecked while trying to cross the South Passage. Why the captain attempted such a passage, when for some time now it has been declared dangerous and most shipping has been entering and leaving via Cape Moreton, I cannot understand. Andrew says it is a great tragedy and that the captain is most certainly at fault.

Georgina Bolan picks up the pagers of an 'Extraordinary' issue of the Moreton Bay Courier, dated 17 March 1847, and reads aloud.

Owing to the night being far advanced when intelligence reached us of the wreck of the 'Sovereign' steamer, we were unable to furnish our readers with anything like a full and accurate account of the lamentable occurrence. The excitement, the hurry and confusion that prevailed amongst the inhabitants, exceeds anything of the kind we have witnessed before on similar occasions. On this account we have felt it necessary to publish an Extraordinary sheet, in order that the public may be put in possession of every particular relating to this dreadful event.

The steamer left Brisbane on the 3rd instant, with the undermentioned passengers, viz, :- Mr. and Mrs. Robert Gore, two children and servant, Mr. Henry Dennis, Darling Downs; Mr. W. Elliott, Clarence River; Mr. E. Berkeley, Brisbane; Mr. Joyner, Sydney; Mr. Richard Stubbs, Brisbane; two female and sixteen male passengers in the steerage, with a master and crew consisting of 26 persons, in all 54 souls.

A succession of southerly gales detained the steamer at Amity Point until the 10th instant, when Captain Cape got the steam up, and proceeded to the bar, but not deeming it prudent to get out, he returned to the anchorage.

On the following morning the steamer proceeded to the bar, which did not present a dangerous appearance. As she passed over the first roller, the passengers on the poop were in the highest spirits, and one of them remarked in a jocular manner that the 'rails' were

down. On going over the second breaker, Mr Gore observed 'here is a five-barred gate, how nobly she tops it! Little did he dream of what would transpire, or what one short hour would effect. The steamer has still another wave to encounter before getting over the bar; and at this critical juncture, the engineer called out to Captain Cape that the framing of the engine and part of the machinery had broken down. As the vessel was making way he could hardly give credence to it at the time, but on descending from his post on the paddle-box, he examined them, and found that the frames of both engines were broken close to the plummer boxes, which were turned upside down. He went away to ascertain the position of the ship, and found she was drifting on the north spit. The engineer shortly afterwards let the steam off, by order of the captain, to prevent the vessel from being blown up. The sea at this time was making breaches over her, and the rudder chains parted. Captain Cape rushed instantly to the helm, and endeavoured to secure it, but his efforts were unsuccessful. As the vessel still drifted, the lar-board anchor was let go, the starboard one having been carried away from the bows, with about fifty fathoms of chain, which parted in the swell. Notwithstanding there was no wind at the time, she continued to drag on the north spit. Previous to letting go the anchor the sails were set to provide against the danger that had been foreseen, but all to no purpose. The rollers now broke upon the devoted vessel with great violence, carrying away bulwarks and causing the wool and billets of wool to move violently about the deck, whereby three men were killed, while several more had their arms and legs broken, or otherwise disabled. The captain then told the passengers that he saw no hope of saving the vessel, as she was still dragging towards the spit. He had just ceased speaking when a tremendous wave broke over the ship, and swept the fore cabin companion flush with the deck, and washed away the forehatches. Tarpaulins were then nailed over them, but proved of no service.

No pen can describe the awful scene which presented itself on board at the time. The passengers were in the utmost consternation, they set up most piteous cries for help; some ran to the side, and in the agonies of despair, plunged into the sea, in the hope that they might reach the shore in some way or other. Messrs. Dennis, Berkeley, and Elliott, worked for some time at the pumps which, however soon got choked up, and they then assisted in

heaving overboard the remainder of the deck cargo. While they were thus employed a heavy sea came and washed Mr. Stubbs overboard, but he managed to get back on deck again. He then went to the ladies' cabin, which he found half full of water. Mr. Gore and her child were lying down on one of the berths quite exhausted, while a large quantity of water poured over them through one of the dead-lights, which had been stove in. He went to her, and taking her child away from her, deposited it in the arms of a servant girl, who was standing with the stewardess on the steps of the companion hatchway. He then returned to the cabin, and conducted Mrs. Gore to the same spot, being the only place of safety at the time in the vessel. He then procured a small quantity of spirits from the steward's cabin, which he administered to the females. Mr. Gore shortly afterwards was heard to call out for his wife, when Mr. Stubbs informed him that she was in safety, and requested him to come down through the skylight, and assist him in blocking up the dead-light. Mr. Gore accordingly went down, and both gentle men endeavoured to thrust mattresses through the aperture, but all their efforts were unavailing, for the water still continued to pour in as each wave broke upon the ship. Mr. Gore and Mr. Stubbs then went on deck, and assisted in heaving the wool overboard. Whilst the latter was working at the wool bales a billet struck him on the left arm and disabled him. Just then Mr. Gore joined him, and they both went aft. Mr. Gore, addressing his wife, said 'Mary, there is no hope for us now; we shall go to heaven together.' Mrs. Gore, turning to the stewardess, said, 'We can die but once. Jesus died for us. God help us.' She repeated these short sentences several times, and seemed perfectly prepared to meet the inevitable fate which awaited her with calmness and Christian-like resignation. Mr. Stubbs now told Mrs. Gore that he thought the vessel was sinking as the water was nearly level with the top stairs. The doors of the companion were then opened, and the females came on deck together. The dreadful moment which was to determine the fate of us all who still remained on board now flew on, and every one saw in the countenance of his companion the vivid expression of his own feelings... One dreadful shriek was heard, proceeding from one of the females in the forepart of the ship, as she (the ship) took one roll, heeled over and sank, and then all was still...

At daybreak on Sunday morning Lieutenant Blamire and Mr. Thornton, of the Customs, with his boat's crew, and several other boats, started for the bay, with the view of rendering any assistance that might be in their power to recover the bodies of the shipwrecked people, as well as any property that might be washed up from the wreck. Captain Wickham, accompanied by Mr. John Balfour, also went in the evening for the purpose of conveying the bodies of Mrs. Gore and child to Brisbane, but on their arrival, decomposition had already commenced, and it was found to be quite impracticable. Captain Wickham attempted to read the service over them, but was so overpowered by his feelings that he was utterly unable to do so, and the sad office was undertaken by another person who was present on this occasion...

Captain Cape... does not remember anything else until he found himself on a hillock of sand on the beach, where he had been carried by the blacks, who dragged him through the surf. As soon as he had partially recovered his strength the natives conducted him to the part of the beach where Mr. Stubbs was. On going there they found the body of Mrs. Gore, which had been washed up near the spot where Mr. Stubbs landed, and shortly afterwards they found the body of her eldest child...

Search was made along the beach for the remains of the other passengers and seamen, but it turned out fruitless... the beach was strewn with wood and portions of the wreck, the timbers were literally ground to pieces, hardly one plank or beam having been found entire.

The following is a correct list of the persons who have met a watery grave:-

cabin passengers

Mr. and Mrs. Robert Gore, two children, and servant girl, Mr. H. Dennis, Mr. E. Berkeley, Mr. Joyner and Mr. Elliott.

Steerage passengers:

Mr. Bishop, Mrs. Chettle, of Chettiegins; Bremmy, a shearer; Isaac Smith, Brisbane; Jas. Anderson, Mr. Gore, Jas. Merry, hutkeeper; Mr. C. Mackenzie, buried at Moreton Island; Frederick M'Kellar, bullock-driver to Mr. C. Mackenzie; Joe, and a one-armed man

lately in the employ of Dr. Ramsay; three men lately in the employ of Mr. Leslie, and four whose names are unknown.

Crew

James Ryan, steward, Mary Ann Griffith, stewardess, Will Rooney, second steward, Henry Neil, third steward, Henry Wood, fore-cabin steward: Mr. Gibson, first officer, Mr. Brown, second officer, Mr. Sommerville, first engineer, Mr. Robinson, second engineer, George Smith, fireman; Isaac Jones, Robert Mackenzie, Henry Cumberland, John Miller and Robert -, George Blair, first cook and William Horsemann, second cook.

Saved:

Captain Cape and Mr. Richard Stubbs, cabin passenger; John M'Quade, John Neil and Lawrence Flynn, fore-cabin passengers; John M'Callum and John Scard, firemen; John Clements, seaman; Thomas Harvey, steward's boy, and James McGovern, boy.

Since the above particulars were furnished, two other bodies have been washed ashore and buried (Mr. Brown, second officer, and Frederick M'Kellar, steerage passenger). A great quantity of the wool, about fifty bales, has also been washed ashore. The wreck of the hull was sold on the 16th instant, by auction for £14 10s.

She sighs. The *Sovereign* was important to the town's development, and quite a favourite of hers. She pasts the sheets from The Courier into her journal and continues.

The 'Sovereign' was most vital to trade and I fear its loss will be long felt, not to mention the loss of lives and their effect on loved ones.

When I think of those poor souls I cannot but reflect on how fortunate we are, all things considered. Andrew is well, and is as busy with his various ventures as always. He is well regarded around town as a shrewd but fair businessman, but I do wish that he could spend a little more time at home. With all of the problems attempting to run a school

in this outpost I am finding that maintaining the house and the garden on my own quite a chore.

Andrew is looking to start a company; something to do with imports and exports. There are men here now, and in Sydney, who are prepared to invest in the future of the place. Andrew tells me that there are enough good supplies of coal at Ipswich to supply industry into the future. The fertile valleys to the west, and the Brisbane River valley supply a range of agricultural products, many suitable for export.

I fear, though, for the future. There is very little education here. There are, as far as I know, three schools in the town, including mine. Most are little more than the front parlour of houses run by ex-soldiers. It is difficult to get students when most of their parents cannot afford the fees, and we must charge something. More than half the children here have no formal learning at all. I will be happy when a more efficient system is in place; of which there is talk from some of the church people. What this town needs, more than anything, is a decent education system. More than half the children have no education at all and this is leading to problems, especially amongst the boys.

James, Eliza and their family are well. Young Andrew is very much a mix of his mother and father; with James' good humour and, I fear, a little too much of Eliza's delicacy. He is an intelligent boy but I fear the lack of proper schooling (there is no school in the area as yet) will limit him. Elizabeth is four now, and has her mother's features. I have offered to teach her when the time comes but Eliza has insisted that she will be fine and that there is talk of a local school opening soon. It is difficult, for young girls in particular, to get an education.

Jack is a sturdy child and quite a favourite of James. He and young Andrew get along well, although I suspect Jack is sometimes a little too

robust in his play. He sometimes has tantrums that Eliza finds difficult to control, especially when James is away. I sometimes think Eliza does not appreciate the attention Jack gets from James. There will be problems later, when Jack reaches a certain age. The colour of his skin, being neither black nor white, will, in this community, pose difficulties for the boy I fear.

I stop reading. Mary is asleep. Probably has been for some time. She looks peaceful. I think about the people in my own life. So many gone! What are we but motes dancing on the surface of the world; none of our lives amount to much. I think of my parents and how I have never once visited their graves. Not that they are real graves; just markers in a row of similar markers in a vast green lawn. When I'm driving in the country (which is seldom these days) I'll sometimes stop at a cemetery and wander through the graves reading headstones. There is a kind of peace in such places. But even the headstones, solid as they are, don't last. Some are vandalised. Others fall over. Nothing lasts.

It's getting late. The ward is quiet, apart from a radio playing somewhere (to keep the nurses and orderlies awake). Mary is out to it. Morphine maybe. The other patient is snoring softly. I drift out of the ward and down to the car, wondering all the while about the ways of the world.

Back home, I pour myself a wine and prepare a late dinner. Pasta again. It's easy! I finish my meal. My glass is empty. I pour another (I'm drinking too much these days). I sit sipping wine, thinking of Grace, my daughter. Still can't believe it. Still don't quite know how to handle it all. Should I contact her or, as Mary suggests, wait for her to contact me. I don't know. The night draws on. Sleep is impossible.

10

The nights these past few days have been cold, but the days have been warm and sunny. In such near perfect weather my spirits lift. In the evenings, when it's too chilly to sit out on the balcony, I stay inside where it's warm, reworking the last pages of my story. Here, in the comfort of my apartment, I have little to complain about. At this late stage of my life I'm content. Sometimes, on my early morning walks through the early morning chill, I see the less fortunate; derros sleeping rough across the city; homeless people emerging from hiding places behind churches or from out of the bushes in Albert Park, some bloodied from fights the previous night (a old derro was killed a few days ago). And I recall how, as a child, I used to wonder if I might become one of them; and my father sayings about the derros, 'there but for the grace of my arse...'

My life is simple. I'm used to being alone. It suits me. Or so I tell myself. Not that I don't have friends. I still see Billy Drahaam and Gary Lee occasionally (we had coffee, the three of us, at Riverside, just last week) and I've joined a local lawn bowling club; one that doesn't have a strict dress code. The members are an interesting bunch, all with stories to tell. They talk about health: heart attacks, cancer, prostate (for the men), breast cancer (for the women). Survivors all. There are two Vietnam veterans. They are the most interesting; not so much through their stories of the war (which they are reluctant to discuss) but, rather, through their ironic take on life. Both go back to Vietnam every second year. It's a sort of pilgrimage for them. I feel a little guilty, not being a baby-boomer and therefore missing out on the draft.

I have my writing (this torturous manuscript) and my art (which I do less of now). The city is my main interest, and the backdrop to my life. I venture further out occasionally (a few days ago I drove to Mt Glorious and took a walk in the rainforest; an always pleasant experience) but mostly my walks are local. I keep promising myself that I will go back to the bora ground, but so far haven't. That experience is

behind me but the memory of walking down that long pathway between the two rings is still powerful. I probably will not go back, just as I will probably not go back to the island and Myora.

I think of Mary. It's now six months since I first visited her in the hospital. For her that's meant six months of torturous procedures and treatments. Since that idyll in New Farm Park we've met a few times and, on each occasion I noticed great changes, as if life was ebbing out of her.

It's a new day. Midmorning. I'm enjoying my ten O'clock coffee when the phone rings. It's her! That same familiar voice, only a little huskier, calling down the wire.

It's me. Can I come over?

Sure, I say. When?

Doing anything this evening?

Nothing planned, I say.

Great, she says, I'll come in half an hour. George will drop me off.

I wait by the elevator, watching the indicator light climb level after level, wondering what her visit will bring. The elevator reaches my floor. After what seems like ages the door opens to reveal a person I don't know. I'm shocked. Mary Wright is an old woman!

Hi lover boy, she wheezes, sorry to interrupt your solitude.

If my shock at her appearance registered she doesn't show it.

Well, she says with an odd smile, cat got your tongue?

I mutter something nonsensical, take her arm and lead her into the apartment. That's another shock: the thinness of her arm, the feel of bone. Body wasting away!

Nice place, she wheezes.

An indulgence, I reply as we continued through the apartment and out on to the balcony.

Whew, she oozes, great view!

As though she'd never seen it before.

We stand side by side leaning on the rail, looking out over the river, the lights reflecting off water. I pull out a chair and she sits.

Thank you, she says meekly, can't stand for long. Silly isn't it?

I go into the kitchen, pour her a gin and tonic, pour myself a white wine and go back out to where she is sitting, face turned to the view. She thanks me, sips her G & T.

Shouldn't do this, she says, referring to the drink, but what the hell!

After asking after my health and offering more flattering comments about the apartment, she tells me that for a time back there she thought she'd fought off the cancer but that it had since spread.

Don't have much time, she says flatly.

I say I'm sorry. She says it doesn't matter. I'm about to protest but she interrupts.

I've something to tell you.

She takes another sip of her gin and tonic, puts the glass down carefully, like it's as fragile as her.

Well, I ask.

I got a letter, she says. From Grace. My... Our daughter. From Hong Kong. She's there? In Hong Kong?

Yes. Works in something to do with stocks. Or shares. All beyond me. Anyway I told her about my condition. She's coming over. Her and her husband and the two children...

Once again I struggle to accept that, after all these years thinking that I was the end of a line, I have a child. And now, it seems, grandchildren! Mary tells me their names, says they are immigrating, that the husband has a job in finance with a local bank.

Well paid I guess.

Guess so, she says.

For a long time neither of us speak. I assume we're thinking the same thoughts; thoughts that are difficult to put into words. It's late. The city has slowed.

There's little traffic along the expressway. The lights on the water look sad. I whisper my daughter's name, Grace.

Mary smiles. I told her all about you, she says. She liked what I told her and is keen to meet you.

I must have looked dubious.

There is time Will; time for you two to get to know each other.

I don't know what to say, just sit staring over the balcony at nothing in particular. Since that day at New Farm Park when Mary told me I had a daughter I'd hoped that we – Grace and I – would one day meet. And yet... Right now I wonder if I'll ever be ready.

I ponder the nature of families; of ancestry and heritage; what we leave behind and what lies ahead. Our sometimes unwitting contributions to lineage. For some reason I remember the visit to my paternal grandfather. It's a recurring memory so the initial occasion must have had a big impact. I was young, maybe five. I remember a little row house in the shadow of Boggo Road Jail. It wasn't exactly in the shadow; the jail was a good way up the road a bit but its great stone wall dominated the scene, at least in my memory's version. I still see the tiny figure of the sentry with his rifle, walking back and forth along the top of the wall; an image that frightened me then and still does. I was so fascinated by it that my father had to pull me away. We went in to a dark room and there was this man sitting there. Dark and mysterious, sitting in that chair not saying a word, yet giving off a strange air of authority. At least that was my impression. I don't think he moved the whole time we were there. Maybe he couldn't. I think my father was uneasy because we didn't stay long. I never saw that man again.

I tell Mary about the visit to my grandfather.

Sounds mysterious, she says.

I tell her about the notes I'd found in my father's bag and how it seemed that I had not only convict ancestry, but Aboriginal ancestry as well.

How do you know, she asks.

I tell her how I'd traced my father's lineage back to a convict woman by the name of Molly Doolan, but that I could not find reference to a father and wondered why this was, that the more I thought about it the more convinced I became that the father of Molly Doolan's child was an Aboriginal man, possibly someone working for Molly Doolan's employer.

Sounds a long shot, she says.

Molly Doolan lived in the early days of the colony, Mary, when there were few women and most of the men were convicts or jailors. Her chances of male company were limited. I knew that black people sometimes worked for the settlers. What if Molly Doolan's lover had been a black man? Would that explain the lack of records? Would that explain the dark skin of my grandfather?

Mary shrugs.

What's the point, she says. All this conjecture... what does it matter Will?

She's right. What does it all matter? But my mind is awirl. There's Grace and there's all that family history and there's the black man at South Brisbane and the dark man who was my grandfather and my father and his derros and...

I tell Mary that family history matters and that the history of the city matters.

She looks tired. History Will; your history! Not mine. I don't have one. Never knew who my grandparents were.

But don't you see Mary; it's our history now. You and me. Because of Grace.

She doesn't answer.

Don't look so good do I, she says after a while.

I tell her she looks fine.

I saw the look on your face Will. When we met at the lift. You were shocked.

Before I can respond she shushes me, says it doesn't matter.

I do have a mirror, you know!

I have no way of responding to this.

I go to this group once a week, she continues. It's a support group for cancer sufferers. Mostly women. At least the one I go to is. Maybe the men can't bring themselves... Anyway they try hard these women. Lots of jokes and false laughter.

Pathetic really. The horrible thing is... well it's those you least expect who are often the first to go. One day they're full of beans, laughing and telling stories, next thing they aren't there. Gone! Better people than me. That's the thing; you never know...

She stops. She's holding back tears.

Don't know what Grace will think when she sees me. And the grandchildren... Don't know how I'll cope. It's all too late. I've been selfish...

I don't know what to say to this. I'm thinking about Grace and her Hong Kong husband and children migrating to Brisbane and how they'll add to the city's demographic mix, and to the colour to the Traverse line. It's all very complex and I'm not sure how important any of it is.

She says she feels cold. We go inside and sit on the sofa. I ask her if she'd like another drink. She says no (she hadn't finished the first). We sit in silence. I'm thinking about Grace, thinking that she must be fifty, or more. That thought saddens me. The passage of time!

Will, Mary says softly, what time is it.

I tell her it's nine thirty.

George is picking me up at ten. Haven't got much time, have we?

That's a pity.

Your story, she says, changing the subject: I've been thinking about it, about how all our lives are journeys and that they all come to an end; like mine is about to. I overheard the doctor – he thought I was asleep - telling a nurse that there wasn't much they could do for me. Isn't that terrible? I try to think about death, about no longer being here, but I can't. Something stops me. I guess it's natural; you know, the inability to comprehend something so terrible as the end...

Anyway, she adds after a long pause, during which I can see she's fighting pain, what happened to Jabiru?

He died Mary.

Tell me, she says.

I go and get my manuscript (it's on my desk, open at the last section, which I'd been working on just before Mary arrived) and bring it to the sofa where Mary is

now reclined. I squeeze in beside her. She snuggles up to me. It's cosy. Two old people on a sofa!

Are you ready, I ask.

She nods, closes her eyes.

For Jabiru the difficult times were behind him. Life on the island had settled to a steady rhythm, ebbing and flowing like the tide, with only the occasional storm and the odd high water. The old disputes between the island people and the newcomers were fading memories. They were all island people now, united through marriage and circumstance, living in a subsistence economy with everyone relying on each other; no longer fighting battles over territory but united in sometimes prolonged disputes with the authorities on the mainland who sometimes saw a different future for the island than they did.

Jabiru fishes when he needs to and rests when he wants. Sometimes he walks the old tracks of Dunbar alone; tracks of his childhood that fill him with bittersweet memories, inducing an aching sense of something lost and unrecoverable. He has his fishing boat and his shack, which is often full of people discussing island business. Children come to hear Jabiru's fabulous stories of his adventures and partake of Mary-Ann's famous biscuits, while women gather in the house discussing women's business. Sometimes Evelyn, the white widow who runs the Dunwich store and post office, will drop by with the mail and stay for a cuppa and a chat, gathering material for her Minjerriba history (a book she would never finish and which would disappear after her death).

There were too many hard truths in that book of hers, Mary Ann would later tell anyone who'd listen. So no one will know what it was really like in them olden days!

Mary-Ann starts going to church. When asked by Jabiru why she goes to the white man's church she always says the same thing.

The Lord speaks to all people.

But it is really for the singing and the stories that she goes.

Them stories, she says to Jabiru one evening when they are sitting out on the veranda, are like our stories.

What stories? Jabiru wants to know.

That story of the creation, she replies. We have stories like that. Only I don't know them well enough, which is a pity. But I do know that we need them stories. It is a pity that our stories are being lost. You have your stories that you tell the children. Maybe some day they will become like the old stories. Legends: that's the word. The legend of Jabiru the warrior, she says with a laugh.

And what stories are they; these bible stories, Jabiru wants to know.

Them that Evelyn put down in her book, she says. Like the one about the Snake's journey.

And what was that, asks Jabiru.

Well, I don't know it properly but it goes something like this: a carpet snake and a black snake set out from the flooded mouth of the Pine River in the shell of a Moreton Bay chestnut. As they went they were followed by a native dog who was trying to catch them. The way was long and difficult and the dog was always there just behind them. They reached Moreton Island and jumped out. The dog swam ashore but was so tired from his exertions that he lay down on the beach and died. The snakes were safe but their boat had been washed away and they had to go along the beach to where they could be closer to the mainland. Moreton Island and Stradbroke Islands were joined then so they went south along the beach and ended up opposite Southport. The channel is narrow there so they swam across to the mainland and from there they went back to the Pine River.

What does it mean? Jabiru asks.

You are good at telling his own stories Jabiru, but you're not always a good listener!

Mary-Ann laughs at Jabiru's hurt pride.

Well, she says, it's a bit like your journey isn't it. You know, going away and returning after all those years...

Jabiru asks why the snake's story is like the stories of the church.

Maybe they aren't exactly the same, Mary-Ann answers, but the story of the creation of the passage between the islands; some say that was caused by the wars between the Moreton Island people and the Stradbroke Island people. That's like the story of the parting of the waters that's there in the Bible.

Anyway, Mary-Ann continues after a pause, we lose our stories we lose our culture. Then we are lost.

Mary-Ann goes quiet. Jabiru put his arm around her shoulder. He is like that with her.

Some times, in the quiet of the evening, sitting out on the veranda of his shack facing the bay, Jabiru will mutter something incomprehensible and Mary-Ann will shrug and, seeking to divert attention from whatever demon is bothering him, ask if he'd like a cuppa. Jabiru will nod his head, but when Mary-Ann returns he'll more than likely be down to shore standing silently by his boat.

Jabiru continues to fish the Rainbow Channel between Amity and Myora on and off, more for the enjoyment of being out on the water than for any real need. Mostly he'll be out off the Pelican Banks but occasionally, if the wind is right and the Trevally are running, he'll contact Coochin and together they'll venture as far as Shag Rocks on the ocean side. Sometimes he'll be away for days, caught in the spell of the bay and its waters, thoughts drifting on currents of warm air. Over the shifting sands of the Amity Banks he'll anchor the old boat and sit for hours, recalling that day when, as a child, he'd gone with the old man towards the Wynnum shore. Sometimes, on clear days, he'll see the distant mountains where he'd gone to the bora. Other times he'll recall the times with Geebung and Jamboor and the killing of Piper. He'll recall Molly Doolan in the river and what he saw as his expulsion from The Pine. Such memories will linger for a while, then blow away in the soft breeze. Jabiru will then remember where he is, haul in the lines and head for home and the comfort of Mary-Ann.

Mary-Ann no longer goes with Jabiru in the boat. She stays ashore, baking biscuits for the children who hang around waiting for one more episode in Jabirus stories of his adventures. Sometimes, when Jabiru is away, Mary-Ann will walk along

the old track beside the Wanga Wallen Banks to visit her people at Dunwich. She'll always end up in the little house that her sister has out at the One Mile. There they'll sit for hours, the children of her nieces and nephews playing noisily in the yard as if there was not a care in the world. Sometimes she'll wonder aloud how it is that she, now an old woman, has no children of her own. Her sister, in an effort to cheer her up, will say, That's a fine man you have there Mary-Ann. Mary-Ann will agree but the sadness will remain and she'll go home to Amity wondering at the ways of the world.

It's early evening. Georgina Bolan, back home from a long and tiring day at the school, finds the house empty. Andrew Bolan is at a meeting – something to do with politics she thinks – and won't be back for dinner. Kate, now a young woman and teaching at the new government school, is away at a friend's place for the night. Georgina makes herself a hasty meal from leftovers, finishes it too quickly, makes a pot of tea and goes to her desk by the window. The view, once uninterrupted all the way to the river, is now partly obscured by other houses and fences.

She picks up her pen, dips it in ink, and begins to write.

10 May 1854

The school is proving to be a challenge. We can't keep up with the demand. In the past month I have had to employ two extra teachers. Neither person, unfortunately, is particularly effective, but it is difficult to get good people. Equipment and supplies, particularly of books, are hard to come by. The Irish Reader is the only source of literature available, and this I find limiting. Of the three small schools in this area two have closed. They could not make ends meet. I charge an annual fee of ten pounds per student but many parents find that difficult. At the same time I find it equally difficult to turn students away. As a consequence the school is losing money. The churches are building new schools (there is one at Ipswich I believe) and the Board of National Education, created by Governor Fitzroy, is in the

process of developing a number of government schools. I can see the time when my school will have to close for I have neither the expertise, nor the energy to compete.

Brisbane is growing fast. There is talk of a railway line to the west to cope with the produce coming in from the interior, although Andrew despairs at the slow rate of progress. Much of this is produce is exported and the wharves are busy. Steamers are now visiting on a regular basis, bringing new products and new immigrants.

There is even talk of us becoming a separate colony, with Brisbane as its capital, although some people are still agitating for Ipswich to be the capital. Andrew is, of course, greatly excited by the prospect of separation and is considering a move into politics. He has always said there is a bright future for this town. I cannot help it; I long sometimes, especially when the weather is particularly hot and sticky, for the old country. Brisbane is a free town now but I cannot help but feel it will never cast off its penal heritage

Young Andrew is eighteen (how the years have flown) and is managing his own run a few miles upriver from The Pine. Frail at an early age, he has turned out well, thanks to Eliza's care and the outdoor life. Andrew says he plans to grow crops more suited to the climate. Pineapple, I believe, is one.

The other children are doing well. I shall devote more time to them in my next entry.

Jack, however, has been a disappointment. James had hoped he would take on a role as manager but that was not to be. Since adolescence he became more and more morose and unmanageable. A few weeks ago he left without a word. He is, as far as we know, in town somewhere. I know no more than that. It is such a great tragedy. I have seen it myself; the terrible and it seems inevitable fate of those with mixed blood in this place. I have had only one in my school; a very pretty girl she was too. But she did not stay. I have watched the growth of this town, and, along with that growth, the decline of the Aborigines. There are no more full bloods left, as far as I am aware, and those of mixed blood seem lost. This is the tragedy of this place; that no one seems to care.

Georgina Bolan closes the journal.

I stop reading. Mary's eyes are closed. I'm heading towards the end of my story, reading to myself.

They are out in Jock's boat, the three of them heading for the Pelican Banks, Jock busy with the tiller, Jabiru and Coochin lazing on the forward deck. It's one of those perfect days of early winter, the sea calm and the breeze slight. No one speaks as the boat slides easily across the clear water.

They have been anchored over the banks for some time before Coochin breaks the silence.

You are the only one left Jabiru, he says softly, the only one of us to carry the markings of the bora. The only properly initiated man of our people.

Having made this statement, he turns his face away from his startled companions lest they see the tears in his eyes.

The boat swings lazily at anchor. There is no response from the others to this unexpected statement. What can they say?

Coochin, his composure regained, narrates a long story.

As a child, he says in his sing-song voice, directing his words at the sea rather than at the others, I stood on the shore watching you go Jabiru; you and the old man in that little canoe with the smoke drifting up from the fire in the middle. You were on your way to the bora. I thought my turn would come. I waited, preying for that old man to come and take me across the water to the bora, but no old man ever came. You were the last Jabiru, the last of the island boys to go to the bora. We waited but you never returned. While you were away the people lost their way. There were no more warriors and no more boras and I regretted that.

Coochin pauses. The others say nothing.

I am not a proper man, Coochin adds after a while.

Jabiru, who has his own demons to contend with - demons only just kept at bay by the solace that the island and its people now offer - replies bitterly.

And what did the bora do for me? What can I pass on to the people? Look around Coochin; there is nothing left of the old ways. The children have grown up who used to listen to my stories. To them I am just an old man. They have other interests. Soon I will be gone.

Jock, who's been listening to all of this in silence, intervenes. Time, he says, to head back.

You make it all sound so sad Will, she says, rising from what I thought was sleep.

She has been listening after all.

I stare out through the windows to black night.

Go on, she says.

For Jabiru the end comes quickly. It begins the day he swims out into the bay to rescue an old fisherman from a swamped boat. Jabiru, the once sturdy warrior and last initiated man of his people, never recovers from the ordeal. A few days after the rescue he goes to his bed and never leaves it. A doctor comes from Brisbane at Jock Campbell's request but goes away shaking his head. I can find nothing the matter, the doctor says to Jock Campbell as he steps onto the boat that will take him back to the mainland. The man simply seems to have given up.

Jabiru's illness leaves a pall upon the people of Amity and Dunwich. Mary-Ann tries all she knows to revive the old warrior's spirits but in the end she too gives up.

He has decided to die, she says to Jock Campbell. Nothing will change that.

James Bolan, by this time a wealthy man, has taken to yachting on the bay. It is, as much as anything, an escape from the tribulations of his business and the increasing severity of his wife's depression. This day he is sailing alone through the passage just beyond the Pelican Banks when he comes up against a stiff southerly and is forced to seek shelter in the little bay round from Amity.

Jock Campbell, sitting with Coochin on the veranda of his shack, watches the boat drift in.

I know that boat, exclaims Jock. It's James Bolan for sure. Come across him a couple of times out in the bay. Nice chap.

Jock Campbell and Coochin walk out along the little jetty Jock has built and help James Bolan secure the boat.

If it's not a big blow the jetty should hold, says Jock. This coves pretty well sheltered. Anyway, you'd better come in, this storm looks like being a beauty! Might need to sit out the night. There's a spare bed for you at the shack.

From Jock's veranda the three men watch the sky's darkening theatre. Lightning flashes and thunder cracks and the riggings of the yacht sing mad harp tunes. The wind increases and the men retire to the interior of the hut. Jock secures the door and the wooden flaps that serve as windows. In the dim light of the interior they sit smoking as the storm rages and the tiny wooden building shakes and rattles. They continued to sit as the storm blows itself out. Only when the sky has quietened does Jock break the news to James.

Jabiru, he says quietly, is dying.

James Bolan is shocked. Many years have passed since he last saw Jabiru but he's never forgotten him. Or forgiven himself for what he saw as his own cowardly conduct towards the man. Often times, sailing down the bay, he'd promised himself that he would seek Jabiru out. But he never did. James Bolan looks down to the rough wooden floor of the veranda.

Jock Campbell closes his eyes. He knows a little of Jabiru's past, apart from what he'd said of his time at The Pine. James Bolan had mentioned his name once or twice on the few occasions they'd met, and Coochin, of course, had filled him in on the bonyi. In his travels throughout the bay he'd met people of all colours and backgrounds but none, perhaps apart from Coochin, had impressed him as much as Jabiru. The man carried the spirit of his people, a spirit that was dying.

For Coochin Jabiru's impending death heralded the end. There would be no man left who could legitimately pass on laws and secrets that were older than time.

Who was there now to look up to? The white men had arrived not long before he was born. In the short time between then and now everything had changed. He looks at his friend Jock Campbell, and at Jock's friend James Bolan. They are the masters now, and although they are his friends, they will never understand.

Thoughts unspoken pass between the three men.

A gust of wind whips the pines. James Bolan shivers. After what seems an eternity James Bolan asks Coochin if anything can be done for Jabiru but Coochin says there is nothing they can do, that Jabiru has decided to die and that is that.

Will you take us to him Coochin, asks James Bolan.

Tomorrow Mr Bolan. It is late now. He is asleep.

Early the next morning they find Jabiru in his hut, lying on a bed of rushes, an old blanket pulled up over his shivering and emaciated body.

Jabiru! James Bolan calls softly.

Jabiru looks up through bloodred eyes. Someone is looking down on him. Someone he knows from long ago.

Mr Bolan, the black man croaks, is it you?

Yes, its me old friend.

I will not get right Mr Bolan.

You will Jabiru, you will...

But there is no conviction in the white man's voice. James Bolan sits down beside the man who was once his friend. Jock Campbell and Coochin sit to one side. Mary-Ann and a small group of women are outside, softly wailing. Jabiru reaches out his hand, draws James Bolan to him.

The dying man is saying something but James Bolan cannot decipher the language.

Jabiru is singing like he did at the bonyi, only the words are different.

I am Jabiru. The great weight of death pulls my body down. I fall into the earth. Yet I soar like a weightless bird. I am going to the sky. Everything is swirling. I am everywhere, light as air. See my people, over there against the hard stone walls of the town, huddled in blankets. I go to them but they do not know me. I am walking

through streets in the shadows of buildings, walking and walking through dead streets. People stare at me. Is that Jabiru they say, who killed the Piper man? I am in a far away place. Lost! I am lost. I am climbing, climbing up to a cold place where the trees are dark and spirits call out. I am walking fast away from that place of bad spirits. Sweat is pouring from me but I cannot stop. There is a white man running. Why is he running, out there on the beach? Who are those men coming with guns? I call to him to come, come into the shelter of the trees white man; come out of the sun, away from those men who will kill you. Why do you not come white man? I hear them out there weeping for Jabiru who is dying. I cannot rise. My body is falling. Where is the old man to guard me from the night? I want to go to him in the night. But I must stay in the shelter, waiting for the dawn. Where are we going old man? To the bora, boy! I am sitting on the top of the ring, unable to move. I look around but there is no one. I am alone at the ring, weeping over the ring that is empty. I am running, trying to catch them but they have gone from me, gone into the bush. I am alone, walking through the country, looking for the others. But I cannot see them. I call out but there is no one to hear. There is a cow among the trees. I am following the cow, my knife ready. I reach the cow and strike at it but the knife is blunt. I keep striking and striking. The cow does not move. It turns its face to me and calls softly, Jabiru, Jabiru! I look into its dumb blank eyes. I cannot escape them. I run. I try to hide but the cow face is everywhere I go, staring stupidly at me through the blood. I am cold. I sweat. I am beset with memories that make no sense. I am going to the mountains. I am climbing. I am going over the mountains. I see great plains before me. They go on forever. I am walking and walking through a landscape of no people. I come to a town where people gather at corners pointing to me as I go. I come to a place by a river where a woman waits beckoning me to come. I walk towards the woman who moves back into the water even as I go forward. She has gone, gone into the water that shimmers in the sunlight so that I am blinded. I reach out for the woman, call a name that I do not recognise, but there is no reply. Where are the children? The children have gone. Where is Molly who was by the river? What happened to her? Where are the children?

What is he saying Coochin?

Don't know Mister Bolan. It is a language I do not know.

All through the night they wait, the three men inside and the women outside wailing softly.

At dawn a high-pitched wail rises from the women outside the hut and even the fishermen in their boats out in the channel know that Jabiru is dead. James Bolan and Jock Campbell wait to one side as the old man is stripped of his clothes and carefully wrapped in tee-tree bark. The two white men stay with the women as Coochin and three island men carry the body to a secret place.

James Bolan and Jock Campbell wait by the shack. There is nothing to say.

Coochin returns around noon.

Jabiru is at rest now, he says.

I stop reading. Mary's eyes are closed. I look down at her. She seems at peace somehow. She opens her eyes, asks in a soft voice if that was the end.

I tell her it is. Almost.

Well...

Can you see them Mary? Coochin, James Bolan and Jock Campbell, striding out along the little jetty towards James' boat, small and distant figures from a story that has reached its end. Close your eyes. Zoom in. Coochin is talking, the others leaning in to hear. What is the black man saying? Maybe he is telling the white men that Jabiru's life at Amity had been good and full, that he'd loved Mary-Ann. See, Jock Campbell is putting his arm around Coochin's shoulder and whispering something. What is he saying? Is he saying that there is strength in his people yet; a strength that will be carried on through Mary-Ann and that therefore there is hope. And James Bolan, walking head bowed, what is he thinking? Is he recalling the early years at The Pine when Jabiru had been the friend who he abandoned because of Molly Doolan who had his child that was adopted by Eliza because their own sickly child needed companionship, leaving Molly Doolan at a loss and who went away and was never seen again.

Bear in closer. Jock Campbell is asking James Bolan if there was a woman called Molly at The Pine.

James Bolan nods, hangs his head.

Was there something there, James...between her and Jabiru?

There was a romance of sorts Jock.

Was that all?

Oh, there was a child, Jock. A boy. Jack. Eliza virtually adopted him. Wouldn't let Molly near him in the end. Molly never quite got over it. She left us and we lost track of her. Why? What did Jabiru say?

Oh, nothing much James. It just seemed there was something there. He mentioned the name Molly a couple of times when we were out in the boat, with time on our hands. We'd talk then to pass the time and he'd tell me things. Sometimes it was difficult to understand what he was trying to say. I liked him, you know. Good fisherman. Last of full bloods you know. At least from the island...

Three men walking slowly along a jetty in silence, a soft breeze blowing from the southeast; a breeze that will strengthen later, giving James Bolan a swift passage home.

They are at the end of the jetty, standing in silence, looking out over the bay, the only sounds that of the sea, the occasional slap of a fish breaking the surface, and the jingle jangle of the ketch's riggings.

Coochin breaks the silence, saying in the singsong way of his people,

The last of our people properly initiated he was, says Coochin. There were no more sacred trials after Jabiru went. I was born too late for the proper ceremonies, though I am full blood and proud.

Meethan koombal wanan. Nutta weenanunnia koobargil. Tuggachin maroomba nulpargano. Tuggachin binna walee bunyah. Woolar nulpa carnova kungilpun. Nulpar cungie cooba.

The two white men turn to their black friend in surprise.

What does it mean Coochin, James Bolan asks.

It's a song, Coochin explains, that we made up.

*There are very few of us left now.
We remember the olden times and sometimes are sorry.
The white people are very good to us.
But sometimes we think they forget us.
Our language will soon die.
And we too will be forgotten.*

James Bolan climbs onto his boat and casts off. Jock Campbell and Coochin watch the boat drift into the setting sun. Quandamooka swallows them up.

I do see them, Mary says. It's a sad end Will.
I'm not sure she's referring to the book.
She looks at her watch, says George will be here soon.

I have a terrible feeling that this will be our last get-together. I get up, stretch and go out onto the balcony, look out at the night, at the reflections all along the river. They look sad. Mary and me; we were just a couple of people going about our lives, motes dancing on the surface of the world indeed! Skin cells on the body of the city, constantly being shredded and replaced, contributing, in our tiny way, to what made the city; not just us but our forebears and our children; all part of the continuum, tiny parts of an ever-changing entity none of us could possibly understand.

I go back inside. Mary is sitting up holding her handbag. She looks very frail! She's about to go to the door when she turns and says, Remember Cloudland?

The question, so out of context, and so at odds with my thoughts, throws me.
Cloudland, she repeats. Remember?

Of course I do! How could I forget Cloudland; so many nights spent there dancing in the prime of my youth, so many memories, the best of them involving her. Visions of the place flashes before me: the grand dome of the entrance and the little funicular railway that ran up from the Breakfast Creek Road tram stop. Thursday nights I'd catch the train from Central after college and walk up from Bowen Hills station in anticipation of a great night ahead, the great bands that played there and,

most of all, of her being there; hopefully asking me to dance. How could I not remember!

Remember, she says, the night we won a prize for the best jivers!

I did. There we were, her and me on the biggest dance floor in the country, being picked out from the crowd as the best jiving couple. I was embarrassed but proud.

Remember that time we danced the last dance, she adds. What was that song called...?

Save the Last Dance for Me.

That's right. Don't happen to have it do you?

Oddly enough I did have it. It was on a compilation CD I hadn't listened to in years. I'm not even sure why I kept it.

Put it on Will. For me.

I put the thing on.

...you can dance every dance with the guy who gives you the eye but darling, save the last dance for me...

Let's dance, she says.

We dance. I close my eyes. We're up close, me and the beauty queen of old. We always danced well together.

Play it again, she insists.

I do what I'm told. We dance some more. She is so light, so frail. There's a smell of death. Yet I hold her.

She stops, breathless.

Better go, she says, George....

I know, I say. George!

So long Will.

So long Mary.

I go out to the balcony. It's cool. All over the city lights are going out.

END

Postscript

The following passage is from *Early Moreton Bay*, by Thomas Welsby, as told to Welsby by Bob Campbell, a mutual friend.

You see Tom, Toompani was getting very old and feeble, for his span of life was past the allotted three score years and ten. A year or two before his death he swam out from the bank above the black beacon, marking the entrance into Myora and rescued an old gin from a swamped boat, and from that exertion and exposure I do not think he ever recovered.

One Sunday evening I was looking across the bay when Coolum came to me in great distress, saying, "Me bin thinkum Toompani go bung. Him very sick." How is that Coolum? "Toompani been lie down on floor in blanket, cry and make sound like big fellow sob. Baal no eat, no drink, only cry." I went down to the ti tree bark humpy where Toompani lived, not far away from Fernandez's place, and on entering saw the grey whiskered old chief lying on the floor with a blanket around him and a couple of dogs at his feet. "Toompani, you been sick?" "Me very sick Mr. Campbell." "You all right, Toompani, you get plenty fellow sleep, you all righ in morning." "Baal me get all right, me been die." Now I knew as well as most people that when Toompani said this, there was something amiss, for the Aborigines I had met possessed that peculiar faculty – if faculty it can be called – of making up their minds to die, and then die they would.

Coolum and I made him some hot tea, which he drank, made him as comfortable as we could and sat by him for some time. Outside there was a gentle noise of feet in the blady grass around his camp, faces peering in at the one window, and forms darkening the door from time to time. The old man lay almost motionless,

with his legs doubled up, moaning and crooning to himself, and towards morning passed away 'e'en at the turning of the tide.

Then a long, low wail went up from his Amity companions, led by the women, taken up by the children, and the fishing boats out towards the channel knew that Toompani had gone.

In the afternoon he was stripped of what clothing he had on, and wrapped in ti tree bark cut in the morning by the men and boys. Rolled up in this ti tree covering, the body was suspended on a pole, and, with sorrowful wailing and cries it was born away across the head of Wallin Creek, past the rushes in the swamp, up the rise of the first hill, there to receive its burial. His blanket and sugar bag were carried to the place selected for his grave, to give Toompani his last peaceful rest. Then the grave was dug, not in the manner or shape or form adopted by white men, but dug in a circular way, about three feet deep. And all this time the moaning and sorrowful cries were kept up. When the grave was sufficiently deep, the blacks rested from their digging, and Toompani was freed from his covering of ti tree, the bark was placed at the bottom of the grave, his blanket was then put on top of the bark and the body placed on the blanket, the free portion then made to cover the body. Then the body, after having been rolled as much as possible, was placed on its side, the legs doubled up as though he were in a sound quiet sleep. Sticks were placed on top of the grave, with no earth on the body, the sticks were covered with bark, and the old fellow was left in his lonely sleep wrapped in his blanket, his body protected from the winds and rains of heaven. To the camp the mourners returned, the wailing and weeping still going on. For days the grave was watched from afar, for the blacks hold impressions that sometimes the dead ones will arise as from a sleep and return to their comrades in anger. A few weeks passed, and one day I accompanied the leading blacks of the place to the grave once more with all his relatives and friends – and every one on the island was his friend. No disturbance of the ti tree bark or sticks had taken place. Sand was thrown on the grave until all its appearance had been changed; the top was levelled down; Toompani was at rest and forever.

There is another passage concerning Toompani, which is quite telling of the times.

A week or more after Toompani's death and burial, I happened to be at Amity and learnt all about it from both white and black. I cannot tell it well enough in blackfellow's lingo, so let me write it as told me by one of my Amity friends. We were sitting, or rather camping, on the buffalo grass beneath a mulberry tree near the telegraph test house at the time, and although to me it was nothing new, to some it may be interesting. I saw the grave the following morning, unknown to any, for if the blacks had learnt of my "sacrilige" there would have been trouble. One of my crew some two years afterwards asked me to point it out to him, so that he might obtain the skull and send it to a friend of his at Sydney University. Although not regarding it as a silly request I had too much respect for the old man to "give him away", besides I knew if I did, it would leak out and his black friends would not like it, and they were all friendly with me. So Toompani still sleeps on the sandy ridge, waiting for the last trump. Black as they could make them, yet his heart was white and his disposition kind. I wonder when the last trump is sounded if Toompani will be passed by and only we of the white civilised race be alone recognised and rewarded. Yes, I wonder.

