

## Year 11 Literature 2021



Image: *Time Magazine* (2013)

### Australian Literature Unit: A Collection of Australian Short Stories

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

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## About The Authors

**Henry Lawson** (17 June 1867 – 2 September 1922) was an Australian writer and bush poet. Along with his contemporary Banjo Paterson, Lawson is among the best-known Australian poets and fiction writers of the colonial period and is often called Australia's "greatest short story writer." A vocal nationalist and republican, Lawson regularly contributed to *The Bulletin*, and many of his works helped popularise the Australian vernacular in fiction.

**Barbara Baynton** (4 June 1857 – 28 May 1929) was an Australian writer known primarily for her short stories about life in the bush. She published the collection *Bush Studies* (1902) and the novel *Human Toll* (1907), as well as writing for *The Bulletin* and *The Sydney Morning Herald*. She was a shrewd manager of her second husband's estate, owning properties in Melbourne and London.

**Bruce Pascoe** (born 1947) is an Aboriginal Australian writer of literary fiction, non-fiction, poetry, essays and children's literature. As well as his own name, Pascoe has written under the pen names Murray Gray and Leopold Glass. He is a professor at the Jumbunna Institute for Indigenous Education & Research at the University of Technology Sydney.

**Kim Scott** (born 18 February 1957) is an Australian novelist of Aboriginal Australian ancestry. He is a descendant of the Noongar people of Western Australia. His first novel, *True Country*, was published in 1993 with an edition published in a French translation in 2005. His second novel, *Benang*, won the Western Australian Premier's Book Awards 1999, the Miles Franklin Award 2000, and the RAKA Kate Challis Award 2001.

**Alice Pung** (born 1981) is an Australian writer, editor and lawyer. Her books include the memoirs *Unpolished Gem* (2006), *Her Father's Daughter* (2011) and the novel *Laurinda* (2014). Pung is a practising solicitor. She has also worked as an art instructor, independent school teacher at primary and secondary schools and is Artist in Residence at Janet Clarke Hall at the University of Melbourne.

**John Kinsella** (born 1963) is an Australian poet, novelist, critic, essayist and editor. His writing is strongly influenced by landscape, and he espouses an 'international regionalism' in his approach to place. He has also frequently worked in collaboration with other writers, artists and musicians.

**Melanie Cheng** is a writer and general practitioner. She was born in Adelaide, grew up in Hong Kong and now lives in Melbourne.

## 'The Drover's Wife' (1892)

By Henry Lawson

The two-roomed house is built of round timber, slabs, and stringy-bark, and floored with split slabs. A big bark kitchen standing at one end is larger than the house itself, veranda included.

Bush all around - bush with no horizon, for the country is flat. No ranges in the distance. The bush consists of stunted, rotten native apple-trees. No undergrowth. Nothing to relieve the eye save the darker green of a few she-oaks which are sighing above the narrow, almost waterless creek. Nineteen miles to the nearest sign of civilisation - a shanty on the main road.

The drover, an ex-squatter, is away with sheep. His wife and children are left here alone.

Four ragged, dried-up-looking children are playing about the house. Suddenly one of them yells: "Snake! Mother, here's a snake!"

The gaunt, sun-browned bushwoman dashes from the kitchen, snatches her baby from the ground, holds it on her left hip, and reaches for a stick.

"Where is it?"

"Here! Gone in the wood-heap;" yells the eldest boy - a sharp-faced urchin of eleven. "Stop there, mother! I'll have him. Stand back! I'll have the beggar!"

"Tommy, come here, or you'll be bit. Come here at once when I tell you, you little wretch!"

The youngster comes reluctantly, carrying a stick bigger than himself. Then he yells, triumphantly:

"There it goes - under the house!" and darts away with club uplifted. At the same time the big, black, yellow-eyed dog-of-all-breeds, who has shown the wildest interest in the proceedings, breaks his chain and rushes after that snake. He is a moment late, however, and his nose reaches the crack in the slabs just as the end of its tail disappears. Almost at the same moment the boy's club comes down and skins the aforesaid nose. Alligator takes small notice of this, and proceeds to undermine the building; but he is subdued after a struggle and chained up. They cannot afford to lose him.

The drover's wife makes the children stand together near the dog-house while she watches for the snake. She gets two small dishes of milk and sets them down near the wall to tempt it to come out; but an hour goes by and it does not show itself.

It is near sunset, and a thunderstorm is coming. The children must be brought inside. She will not take them into the house, for she knows the snake is there, and may at any moment come up through a crack in the rough slab floor; so she carries several armfuls of firewood into the kitchen, and then takes the children there. The kitchen has no floor - or, rather, an earthen one - called a "ground floor" in this part of the bush. There is a large, roughly-made table in the centre of the place. She brings the children in, and makes them get on this table. They are two boys and two girls -

mere babies. She gives some supper, and then, before it gets dark, she goes into house, and snatches up some pillows and bedclothes - expecting to see or lay or hand on the snake any minute. She makes a bed on the kitchen table for the children, and sits down beside it to watch all night.

She has an eye on the corner, and a green sapling club laid in readiness on the dresser by her side; also her sewing basket and a copy of the *Young Ladies' Journal*. She has brought the dog into the room.

Tommy turns in, under protest, but says he'll lie awake all night and smash that blinded snake.

His mother asks him how many times she has told not to swear.

He has his club with him under the bedclothes, and Jacky protests:

"Mummy! Tommy's skinnin' me alive wif his club. Make him take it out."

Tommy: "Shet up you little ---! D'yer want to be bit with the snake?"

Jacky shuts up.

"If yer bit," says Tommy, after a pause, "you'll swell up, an smell, an' turn red an' green an' blue all over till yer bust. Won't he mother?"

"Now then, don't frighten the child. Go to sleep," she says.

The two younger children go to sleep, and now and then Jacky complains of being "skeezed." More room is made for him. Presently Tommy says: "Mother! Listen to them (adjective) little possums. I'd like to screw their blanky necks."

And Jacky protests drowsily.

"But they don't hurt us, the little blanks!"

Mother: "There, I told you you'd teach Jacky to swear." But the remark makes her smile. Jacky goes to sleep.

Presently Tommy asks:

"Mother! Do you think they'll ever extricate the (adjective) kangaroo?"

"Lord! How am I to know, child? Go to sleep."

"Will you wake me if the snake comes out?"

"Yes. Go to sleep."

Near midnight. The children are all asleep and she sits there still, sewing and reading by turns. From time to time she glances round the floor and wall-plate, and, whenever she hears a noise, she reaches for the stick. The thunderstorm comes on, and the wind, rushing through the cracks in the slab wall, threatens to blow out her candle. She places it on a sheltered part of the dresser and fixes up a newspaper to protect it. At every flash of lightning, the cracks between the slabs gleam like polished silver. The thunder rolls, and the rain comes down in torrents.

Alligator lies at full length on the floor, with his eyes turned towards the partition. She knows by this that the snake is there. There are large cracks in that wall opening under the floor of the dwelling-house.

She is not a coward, but recent events have shaken her nerves. A little son of her brother-in-law was lately bitten by a snake, and died. Besides, she has not heard from her husband for six months, and is anxious about him.

He was a drover, and started squatting here when they were married. The drought of 18-- ruined him. He had to sacrifice the remnant of his flock and go droving again. He intends to move his family into the nearest town when he comes back, and, in the meantime, his brother, who keeps a shanty on the main road, comes over about once a month with provisions. The wife has still a couple of cows, one horse, and a few sheep. The brother-in-law kills one of the latter occasionally, gives her what she needs of it, and takes the rest in return for other provisions.

She is used to being left alone. She once lived like this for eighteen months. As a girl she built the usual castles in the air; but all her girlish hopes and aspirations have long been dead. She finds all the excitement and recreation she needs in the *Young Ladies' Journal*, and Heaven help her! Takes a pleasure in the fashion plates.

Her husband is an Australian, and so is she. He is careless, but a good enough husband. If he had the means he would take her to the city and keep her there like a princess. They are used to being apart, or at least she is. "No use fretting," she says. He may forget

sometimes that he is married; but if he has a good cheque when he comes back he will give most of it to her. When he had money he took her to the city several times - hired a railway sleeping compartment, and put up at the best hotels. He also bought her a buggy, but they had to sacrifice that along with the rest.

The last two children were born in the bush - one while her husband was bringing a drunken doctor, by force, to attend to her. She was alone on this occasion, and very weak. She had been ill with fever. She prayed to God to send her assistance. God sent Black Mary - the "whitest" gin in all the land. Or, at least, God sent King Jimmy first, and he sent Black Mary. He put his black face round the door post, took in the situation at a glance, and said cheerfully: "All right, missus - I bring my old woman, she down along a creek."

One of the children died while she was here alone. She rode nineteen miles for assistance, carrying the dead child.

It must be near one or two o'clock. The fire is burning low. Alligator lies with his head resting on his paws, and watches the wall. He is not a very beautiful dog, and the light shows numerous old wounds where the hair will not grow. He is afraid of nothing on the face of the earth or under it. He will tackle a bullock as readily as he will tackle a flea. He hates all other dogs - except kangaroo-dogs - and has a marked dislike to friends or relations of the family. They seldom call, however. He sometimes makes friends with strangers. He hates snakes and has killed many, but he will be bitten some day and die; most snake-dogs end that way.

Now and then the bushwoman lays down her work and watches, and listens, and thinks. She thinks of things in her own life, for there is little else to think about.

The rain will make the grass grow, and this reminds her how she fought a bush-fire once while her husband was away. The grass was long, and very dry, and the fire threatened to burn her out. She put on an old pair of her husband's trousers and beat out the flames with a green bough, till great drops of sooty perspiration stood out on her forehead and ran in streaks down her blackened arms. The sight of his mother in trousers greatly amused Tommy, who worked like a little hero by her side, but the terrified baby howled lustily for his "mummy." The fire would have mastered her but for four excited bushmen who arrived in the nick of time. It was a mixed-up affair all round; when she went to take up the baby he screamed and struggled convulsively, thinking it was a "blackman;" and Alligator, trusting more to the child's sense than his own instinct, charged furiously, and (being old and slightly deaf) did not in his excitement at first recognize his mistress's voice, but continued to hang on to the moleskins until choked off by Tommy with a saddle-strap. The dog's sorrow for his blunder, and his anxiety to let it be known that it was all a mistake, was as evident as his ragged tail and a twelve-inch grin could make it. It was a glorious time for the boys; a day to look back to, and talk about, and laugh over for many years.

She thinks how she fought a flood during her husband's absence. She stood for hours in the drenching downpour, and dug an overflow gutter to save the dame across the creek. But she could not save it. There are things that a bushwoman cannot do. Next morning the dam was broken, and her heart was nearly broken too,

for she thought how her husband would feel when he came home and saw the result of years of labour swept away. She cried then.

She also fought the pleuro-pneumonia - dosed and bled the few remaining cattle, and wept again when her two best cows died.

Again, she fought a mad bullock that besieged the house for a day. She made bullets and fired at him through cracks in the slabs with an old shot-gun. He was dead in the morning. She skinned him and got seventeen-and-sixpence for the hide.

She also fights the crows and eagles that have designs on her chickens. Her plan of campaign is very original. The children cry "Crows, mother!" and she rushes out and aims a broomstick at the birds as though it were a gun, and says "Bung!" The crows leave in a hurry; they are cunning, but a woman's cunning is greater.

Occasionally a bushman in the horrors, or a villainous-looking sundowner, comes and nearly scares the life out of her. She generally tells the suspicious-looking stranger that her husband and two sons are at work below the dam, or over at the yard, for he always cunningly inquires for the boss.

Only last week a gallows-faced swagman - having satisfied himself that there were no men on the place - threw his swag down on the veranda, and demanded tucker. She gave him something to eat; then he expressed the intention of staying for the night. It was sundown then. She got a batten from the sofa, loosened the dog, and confronted the stranger, holding the batten in one hand and the dog's collar with the other. "Now you go!" she said. He looked at her and at the dog, said "All right, mum," in a cringing tone and

left. She was a determined-looking woman, and Alligator's yellow eyes glared unpleasantly - besides, the dog's chawing-up apparatus greatly resembled that of the reptile he was named after.

She has few pleasures to think of as she sits here alone by the fire, on guard against a snake. All days are much the same for her; but on Sunday afternoon she dresses herself, tidies the children, smartens up baby, and goes for a lonely walk along the bush-track, pushing an old perambulator in front of her. She does this every Sunday. She takes as much care to make herself and the children look smart as she would if she were going to do the block in the city. There is nothing to see, however, and not a soul to meet. You might walk for twenty miles along this track without being able to fix a point in your mind, unless you are a bushman. This is because of the everlasting, maddening sameness of the stunted trees - that monotony which makes a man long to break away and travel as far as trains can go, and sail as far as ship can sail - and farther.

But this bushwoman is used to the loneliness of it. As a girl-wife she hated it, but now she would feel strange away from it.

She is glad when her husband returns, but she does not gush or make a fuss about it. She gets him something good to eat, and tidies up the children.

She seems contented with her lot. She loves her children, but has no time to show it. She seems harsh to them. Her surroundings are not favourable to the development of the "womanly" or sentimental side of nature.

It must be nearing morning now; but the clock is in the dwelling-house. Her candle is nearly done; she forgot that she was out of candles. Some more wood must be got to keep the fire up, and so she shuts the dog inside and hurries around to the woodheap. The rain has cleared off. She seizes a stick, pulls it out, and - crash! The whole pile collapses.

Yesterday she bargained with a stray blackfellow to bring her some wood, and while he was at work she went in search of a missing cow. She was absent an hour or so, and the native black made good use of his time. On her return she was so astonished to see a good heap of wood by the chimney, and she gave him an extra fig of tobacco, and praised him for not being lazy. He thanked her, and left with head erect and chest well out. He was the last of his tribe and a King; but he had built that wood-heap hollow.

She is hurt now, and tears spring to her eyes as she sits down again by the table. She takes up a handkerchief to wipe the tears away, but pokes her eyes with her bare fingers instead. The handkerchief is full of holes, and she finds that she has put her thumb through one, and her forefinger through another.

This makes her laugh, to the surprise of the dog. She has a keen, very keen, sense of the ridiculous; and some time or other she will amuse bushmen with the story.

She has been amused before like that. One day she sat down "to have a good cry," as she said - and the old cat rubbed against her dress and "cried too." Then she had to laugh.



It must be near daylight now. The room is very close and hot because of the fire. Alligator still watches the wall from time to time. Suddenly he becomes greatly interested; he draws himself a few inches nearer the partition, and a thrill runs through his body. The hair on the back of neck begins to bristle, and the battle-light is in his yellow eyes. She knows what this means, and lays her hand on the stick. The lower end of one of the partition slabs has a large crack on both sides. An evil pair of small, bright bead-like eyes glisten at one of these holes. The snake - a black one - comes slowly out, about a foot, and moves its head up and down. The dog lies still, and the woman sits as one fascinated. The snake comes out a foot further. She lifts her stick, and the reptile, as though suddenly aware of danger, sticks his head in through the crack on the other side of the slab, and hurries to get his tail round after him. Alligator springs, and his jaws come together with a snap. He misses, for his nose is large, and the snake's body close down on the angle formed by the slabs and the floor. He snaps again as the tail comes round. He has the snake now, and tugs it out eighteen inches. Thud, thud. Alligator gives another pull and he has the snake out - a black brute, five feet long. The head rises to dart about, but the dog has the enemy close to the neck. He is a big, heavy dog, but quick as a terrier. He shakes the snake as though he felt the original curse in common with mankind. The eldest boy wakes up, seizes his stick, and tries to get out of bed, but his mother forces him back with a grip of iron. Thud, thud - the snake's back is broken in several places. Thud, thud - its head is crushed, and Alligator's nose skinned again.

She lifts the mangled reptile on the point of her stick, carries it to the fire, and throws it in; then piles on the wood and watches the

snake burn. The boy and the dog watch too. She lays her hand on the dog's head, and all the fierce, angry light dies out of his yellow eyes. The younger children are quieted, and presently go to sleep. The dirty-legged boy stands for a moment in his shirt, watching the fire. Presently he looks up at her, sees the tears in her eyes, and, throwing his arms around her neck exclaims:

"Mother, I won't never go drovin' blarst me if I do!"

And she hugs him to her worn-out breast and kisses him; and they sit thus together while the sickly daylight breaks over the bush.

## 'The Chosen Vessel' (1896)

By Barbara Baynton

SHE laid the stick and her baby on the grass while she untied the rope that tethered the calf. The length of the rope separated them. The cow was near the calf, and both were lying down. Feed along the creek was plentiful, and every day she found a fresh place to tether it, since tether it she must, for if she did not, it would stray with the cow out — on the plain. She had plenty of time to go after it, but then there was baby; and if the cow turned on her out on the plain, and she with baby — she had been a town girl and was afraid of the cow, but she did not want the cow to know it. She used to run at first when it bellowed its protest against the penning up of its calf. This satisfied the cow, also the calf, but the woman's husband was angry, and called her — the noun was cur. It was he who forced her to run and meet the advancing cow, brandishing a stick, and uttering threatening words till the enemy turned and ran. "That's the way!" the man said, laughing at her white face. In many things he was worse than the cow, and she wondered if the same rule would apply to the man, but she was not one to provoke skirmishes even with the cow. It was early for the calf to go "to bed" — nearly an hour earlier than usual; but she had felt so restless all day. Partly because it was Monday, and the end of the week that would bring her and baby the companionship of its father, was so far off. He was a shearer, and had gone to his shed before daylight that morning. Fifteen miles as the crow flies separated them. There was a track in front of the house, for it had once been a wine shanty, and a few travellers passed along at

intervals. She was not afraid of horsemen; but swagmen, going to, or worse, coming from the dismal, drunken little township, a day's journey beyond, terrified her. One had called at the house today, and asked for tucker. Ah! that was why she had penned up the calf so early! She feared more from the look of his eyes, and the gleam of his teeth, as he watched her newly awakened baby beat its impatient fists upon her covered breasts, than from the knife that was sheathed in the belt at his waist. She had given him bread and meat. Her husband, she told him, was sick. She always said that when she was alone, and a swagman came, and she had gone in from the kitchen to the bedroom, and asked questions and replied to them in the best man's voice she could assume. Then he had asked to go into the kitchen to boil his billy, but she gave him tea, and he drank it on the wood-heap. He had walked round and round the house, and there were cracks in some places, and after the last time he had asked for

tobacco. She had none to give him, and he had grinned, because there was a broken clay pipe near the wood-heap where he stood, and if there were a man inside, there ought to have been tobacco. Then he asked for money, but women in the bush never have money. At last he had gone, and she, watching through the cracks, saw him when about a quarter of a mile away, turn and look back at the house. He had stood so for some moments with a pretence of fixing his swag, and then, apparently satisfied, moved to the left towards the creek. The creek made a bow round the house, and when he came to it she lost sight of him. Hours after, watching intently for signs of smoke, she saw the man's dog chasing some sheep that had gone to the creek for water, and saw it slink

back suddenly, as if the man had called it. More than once she thought of taking her baby and going to her husband. But in the past, when she had dared to speak of the dangers to which her loneliness exposed her, he had taunted and sneered at her. She need not flatter herself, he had coarsely told her, that anybody would want to run away with her. Long before nightfall she placed food on the kitchen table, and beside it laid the big brooch that had been her mother's. It was the only thing of value that she had. And she left the kitchen door wide open. The doors inside she securely fastened. Beside the bolt in the back one she drove in the steel and scissors; against it she piled the table and the stools. Underneath the lock of the front door she forced the handle of the spade, and the blade between the cracks in the flooring boards. Then the prop-stick, cut into lengths, held the top, as the spade held the middle. The windows were little more than portholes; she had nothing to fear through them. She ate a few mouthfuls of food and drank a cup of milk. But she lighted no fire, and when night came, no candle, but crept with her baby to bed. What woke her? The wonder was that she had slept — she had not meant to. But she was young, very young. Perhaps the shrinking of the galvanized roof — yet hardly, since that was so usual. Something had set her heart beating wildly; but she lay quite still, only she put her arm over her baby. Then she had both round it, and she prayed, "Little baby, little baby, don't wake!" The moon's rays shone on the front of the house, and she saw one of the open cracks, quite close to where she lay, darken with a shadow. Then a protesting growl reached her; and she could fancy she heard the man turn hastily. She plainly heard the thud of something striking

the dog's ribs, and the long flying strides of the animal as it howled and ran. Still watching, she saw the shadow darken every crack along the wall. She knew by the

sounds that the man was trying every standpoint that might help him to see in; but how much he saw she could not tell. She thought of many things she might do to deceive him into the idea that she was not alone. But the sound of her voice would wake baby, and she dreaded that as though it were the only danger that threatened her. So she prayed, "Little baby, don't wake, don't cry!" Stealthily the man crept about. She knew he had his boots off, because of the vibration that his feet caused as he walked along the veranda to gauge the width of the little window in her room, and the resistance of the front door. Then he went to the other end, and the uncertainty of what he was doing became unendurable. She had felt safer, far safer, while he was close, and she could watch and listen. She felt she must watch, but the great fear of waking baby again assailed her. She suddenly recalled that one of the slabs on that side of the house had shrunk in length as well as in width, and had once fallen out. It was held in position only by a wedge of wood underneath. What if he should discover that! The uncertainty increased her terror. She prayed as she gently raised herself with her little one in her arms, held tightly to her breast. She thought of the knife, and shielded her child's body with her hands and arms. Even its little feet she covered with its white gown, and baby never murmured — it liked to be held so. Noiselessly she crossed to the other side, and stood where she could see and hear, but not be seen. He was trying every slab, and was very near to that with the wedge under it. Then she saw him find it; and heard the sound of

the knife as bit by bit he began to cut away the wooden support. She waited motionless, with her baby pressed tightly to her, though she knew that in another few minutes this man with the cruel eyes, lascivious mouth, and gleaming knife would enter. One side of the slab tilted; he had only to cut away the remaining little end, when the slab, unless he held it, would fall outside. She heard his jerked breathing as it kept time with the cuts of the knife, and the brush of his clothes as he rubbed the wall in his movements, for she was so still and quiet, that she did not even tremble. She knew when he ceased, and wondered why. She stood well concealed; she knew he could not see her, and that he would not fear if he did, yet she heard him move cautiously away. Perhaps he expected the slab to fall. Still his motive puzzled her, and she moved even closer, and bent her body the better to listen. Ah! what sound was that? "Listen! Listen!" she bade her heart — her heart that had kept so still, but now bounded with tumultuous throbs that dulled her ears. Nearer and nearer came the sounds, till the welcome

thud of a horse's hoof rang out clearly. "Oh, God! Oh, God! Oh, God!" she cried, for they were very close before she could make sure. She turned to the door, and with her baby in her arms tore frantically at its bolts and bars. Out she darted at last, and running madly along, saw the horseman beyond her in the distance. She called to him in Christ's name, in her babe's name, still flying like the wind with the speed that deadly peril gives. But the distance grew greater and greater between them, and when she reached the creek her prayers turned to wild shrieks, for there crouched the man she feared, with outstretched arms that caught her as she fell. She knew he was offering terms if she ceased to

struggle and cry for help, though louder and louder did she cry for it, but it was only when the man's hand gripped her throat, that the cry of "Murder" came from her lips. And when she ceased, the startled curlews took up the awful sound, and flew shrieking over the horseman's head. \* \* \* \* \* "By God!" said the boundary rider, "it's been a dingo right enough! Eight killed up here, and there's more down in the creek — a ewe and a lamb, I'll bet; and the lamb's alive!" And he shut out the sky with his hand, and watched the crows that were circling round and round, nearing the earth one moment, and the next shooting skywards. By that he knew the lamb must be alive; even a dingo will spare a lamb sometimes. Yes, the lamb was alive, and after the manner of lambs of its kind did not know its mother when the light came. It had sucked the still warm breasts, and laid its little head on her bosom, and slept till the morn. Then, when it looked at the swollen disfigured face, it wept and would have crept away, but for the hand that still clutched its little gown. Sleep was nodding its golden head and swaying its small body, and the crows were close, so close, to the mother's wide-open eyes, when the boundary rider galloped down. "Jesus Christ!" he said, covering his eyes. He told afterwards how the little child held out its arms to him, and how he was forced to cut its gown that the dead hand held. \* \* \* \* \* It was election time, and as usual the priest had selected a candidate. His choice was so obviously in the interests of the squatter, that Peter Hennessey's reason, for once in his life, had over-ridden superstition, and he had dared promise his vote to another. Yet he was uneasy, and every time he woke in the night (and it was often) he heard the murmur of his

mother's voice. It came through the partition, or under the door. If through the partition, he knew she was praying in her bed; but when the sounds came under the door, she was on her knees before the little altar in the corner that enshrined the statue of the Blessed Virgin and Child. "Mary, Mother of Christ! save my son! Save him!" prayed she in the dairy as she strained and set the evening's milking "Sweet Mary! for the love of Christ, save him!" The grief in her old face made the morning meal so bitter, that to avoid her he came late to his dinner. It made him so cowardly, that he could not say goodbye to her, and when night fell on the eve of the election day, he rode off secretly. He had thirty miles to ride to the township to record his vote. He cantered briskly along the great stretch of plain that had nothing but stunted cottonbush to play shadow to the full moon, which glorified a sky of earliest spring. The bruised incense of the flowering clover rose up to him, and the glory of the night appealed vaguely to his imagination, but he was preoccupied with his present act of revolt. Vividly he saw his mother's agony when she would find him gone. At that moment, he felt sure, she was praying. "Mary! Mother of Christ!" He repeated the invocation, half unconsciously. And suddenly, out of the stillness, came Christ's name to him — called loudly in despairing accents. "For Christ's sake! Christ's sake! Christ's sake!" called the voice. Good Catholic that he had been, he crossed himself before he dared to look back. Gliding across a ghostly patch of pipe-clay, he saw a white-robed figure with a babe clasped to her bosom. All the superstitious awe of his race and religion swayed his brain. The moonlight on the gleaming clay was a "heavenly light" to him, and he knew the white figure not for flesh and blood,

but for the Virgin and Child of his mother's prayers. Then, good Catholic that once more he was, he put spurs to his horse's sides and galloped madly away. His mother's prayers were answered. Hennessey was the first to record his vote — for the priest's candidate. Then he sought the priest at home, but found that he was out rallying the voters. Still, under the influence of his blessed vision, Hennessey would not go near the public-houses, but wandered about the outskirts of the town for hours, keeping apart from the townspeople, and fasting as penance. He was subdued and mildly ecstatic, feeling as a repentant chastened child, who awaits only the kiss of peace. And at last, as he stood in the graveyard crossing himself with reverent awe, he heard in the gathering twilight the roar of many voices crying the name of the victor at the election. It was well with the priest.

Again Hennessey sought him. He sat at home, the house-keeper said, and led him into the dimly-lighted study. His seat was immediately opposite a large picture, and as the housekeeper turned up the lamp, once more the face of the Madonna and Child looked down on him, but this time silently, peacefully. The half-parted lips of the Virgin were smiling with compassionate tenderness; her eyes seemed to beam with the forgiveness of an earthly mother for her erring but beloved child. He fell on his knees in adoration. Transfixed, the wondering priest stood, for, mingled with the adoration, "My Lord and my God!" was the exaltation, "And hast Thou chosen me?" "What is it, Peter?" said the priest. "Father," he answered reverently, and with loosened tongue he poured forth the story of his vision. "Great God!" shouted the priest, "and you did not stop to save her! Have you not

heard?" \* \* \* \* \* Many miles further down  
the creek a man kept throwing an old cap into a waterhole the dog  
would bring it out and lay it on the opposite side to where the man  
stood, but would not allow the man to catch him, though it was  
only to wash the blood of the sheep from his mouth and throat, for  
the sight of blood made the man tremble.

## THYLACINE

In the Australian bush at night, you could find a lost sixpence or the feldspar in a piece of quartz; you could find the buckle from a dog's collar or a sooty owl in a tree. But you'd never find a pound note or an ant, and you'd never find an old sepia photograph, or why things are the way they are, although men will look for it there, some of them all of their lives.

And so Douglas was looking again, even though he'd told his brother he was going to check on the chooks. That cold winter luminescence shone with such a fierce white light. Ah, it's a cold star – a cold star bearing the steely light of a cold moon, bearing that light without blinking, allowing it to reveal old sixpences and feldspar, dog's buckles and sooty owls, but very little else. More than enough light for some things, but not enough for vision. Old iron shines like new milled steel, a shovel blade glints sharp from the work in gravelly soil, trees shimmer like chandeliers, the dam like a disc of stamped plate. All these old things gleam anew. The barbed wire's rusty knots glisten with frost, spider's webs are jewelled like the most precious things hung from the pale necks of the world's most desirable women.

Douglas checked the chooks and they stared back at him.

Stupid chooks. He closed his fingers around the neck of a hen, and it blinked one eye but didn't move.

He checked the wire where he'd made the repair; it was still intact. Six chooks they'd lost, and not a murmur. No feathers. No wild cackles. No fox dashing about in panic and blood lust. Just a chook off the roost and a neat hole in the wire. Douglas didn't know this animal. Clarrie said a dingo or a native cat, but Douglas knew he didn't believe it himself. Clarrie knew the bush better than that, but he was the sort of bloke who always needed to propose a solution even if he knew it was wrong; anything to fill a gap.

When they'd found the human skulls, Clarrie had said it was just old-timers caught in a fire, even though he must have seen the strangeness of the sockets. Old Pearson had died out in the bush, killed by a tree that slipped back off its stump and drove his leg into the ground. Pinned him there. The bull ants stripped him clean. Clarrie had seen Pearson's skull and must have seen the difference in these others, but he just rolled them away with his boot and said it must have been two old-timers. Clarrie was like that.

Douglas saw the stones but didn't bother to tell Clarrie; he'd only argue back. So he'd returned later and picked them up and seen how the long one matched the hollow in the flat one. Douglas placed them in the crook of a tree near where the skulls had been found. Where he could put his hands on them again.

The two brothers got on alright. They could put in a row of fence posts in a day and say no more than was needed to accomplish the task -- and to put in a row of stringybark posts you don't need to say a lot. There's holes and posts and a straight line. If the posts ram tight, and the eye slips along the flat faces of each post, the job's done.

Douglas didn't need people. He sold the tickets at the local dance because it meant you could stand out on the verandah and listen to the blokes yarn and maybe add your piece about the last flood, but it was a way of meeting people without going through the bother of trying to balance a noisy china cup on a saucer and think of something to say at the same time.

And the women always made him nervous. And dancing. Dancing was plain impossible. He watched other blokes dance, blokes like him, bush workers, timber millers, cow cockies, and yet they could get around; some of them just glided about.

He watched the women's bodies like the other men, but he'd never really seen one he wanted. During national service the boys had played up a bit, and that time he'd gone up to Candelo with the cricket team he didn't come back for three days. But not anyone you'd want to marry, stay with always; and anyway, who'd have him? Short, freckly bloke on a broken-down dry ridge farm. Women round here knew where the gravel pits were.

He'd never asked Clarrie. He'd never asked Clarrie anything much. Clarrie wasn't the sort of bloke you asked anything of. He guessed that Clarrie had knocked about a bit. Those trips to Bombala to sell cows sometimes took a while, but Clarrie never seemed ... never seemed lonely or anything. Clarrie always had everything worked out. Douglas thought he'd know if anything worried his brother. When the old man had died, Douglas had watched, stunned, as tears dropped from his brother's eyes. Clarrie had wiped his face with a rag and said, 'Dad taught me everything. All I know about the bush and that. That's all,' and again he had plunged his spade into the broken clay of the grave.



They got on alright, but there were times when Douglas liked to get away. The nights at the dances, the other blokes and the music, watching the women – it was just something different. And nights like this, with the cold moonlight.

He didn't tell Clarrie, you couldn't, but he knew some poems by heart. All the schoolbooks were still on the shelf. Probably never occurred to Clarrie to throw them out. The sixth-grade reader, *Modern Short Stories* and that book of French poems that came with their lounge suite at the clearing sale.

He didn't feel like it tonight, but sometimes he'd said those poems looking over the dam and down to the river: '*Slowly, silently, now the moon / walks the night in her silver shoon . . .*' Shoon, shoon. He'd worked out that it must be shoes. Their teacher had just expected them to know, but then she was the sort of jackass who'd never seen the paws of a sleeping dog in the frosty moonlight. How many people had?

He'd worked out how to say some of the French poems, too. He'd looked in amazement at the sheet music while cleaning up after a dance one night as a folded page fell from the back of a book, with the words '*non, je ne regrette rien*'. He wondered what it meant, but he found '*alouette, gentille alouette*', and suddenly the words and the song snapped to the front of his brain and he turned back to '*non, je ne regrette rien*', and he worked out how most of the words must sound; but he'd never told Clarrie. Clarrie wasn't the sort of bloke you could.

What was that?

He didn't move. He didn't even let his heart beat any differently after its initial hesitation. He could feel the hair on his shoulders and across his neck edging upwards, but he didn't move.

There it was again. A growl like he'd never heard before. He didn't move his head, but his eyes swivelled and saw it almost straightaway. After all, he was a bushman, and this was his yard, and so his eyes found the strange object in it instantly. And look at it! What an animal!

The beast had been looking at the house but felt the man's eyes find his own, and they looked at each other, and the barbs of glance hooked in eye flesh. Memories and visions are made thus.

The animal was gone in the next instant, and Douglas knew he'd be off, but he followed him to the edge of the timber and stopped by the fence. Douglas spoke and his voice, clear and hard in the sharp air, chased and found the beast. '*Je vous regarde* – I saw you, dog, or . . . wolf. That's what you are. I saw you, tiger dog. Thylacine.' What a word to pitch into the moonlight.

Even as it ran, the animal heard the yelling and the strange word that was its name, and the sound would stay. Thylacine! It stood on the dry ridge among the shards of quartz and swung its heavy head to look down into the valley, knowing it was safe. Surely nothing could spirit itself through time so quickly. But a voice could, and did again.

'I know you're up there, tiger. I saw you.'

The two knew each other. The wolf would remember the voice and the man would never forget the beast. In this universe of beings, these two were fused by the light of a silver moon. Both hearts beat; the tiger on the ridge, the man in the valley.

'I saw you, tiger.'

There are some things, the man knew, that could never be denied. A man's spirit is built thus.

But animals are as logical as men, and Douglas had stood out in the bush where he knew the tiger must pass. The feldspar shone in the shafts of moonlight, the eucalypt leaves hung like small, bright scimitars of snipped tin, and the dog was there. Douglas could feel its presence by the way his hair crept beneath his collar.

'I know you're there, dog.'

At the first word, before the muscles of the legs had flung the bones into flight, the animal's eyes had seen the other's eyes above where the voice had come out of the moonshine.

'I saw you, Thylacine. You can't deny that.'

\* \* \*

Some nights, man's logic and beast's logic diverged. The man knew he'd keep seeing it, although not so close to the house again. Chickens weren't that attractive. Not to a wild animal. Foxes and chickens were built for each other, but Tasmanian tigers – well, they could take chickens or leave them, and when men were around, they left them.

But some nights, out of the bush came that quiet sound. No chase, no guns, just the sound. You looked out for things like that. You didn't get too close to snakes, you kept out of the way of eagles, and, especially, you kept out of the way of men. But this one kept on being there. You never heard it; it was always where you couldn't smell it. And then, just that noise, not growling, just the same quiet sounds. No harm came, but you avoided things like that, if you could. It was better without the moon. The man wasn't there without the moon.

\* \* \*

'Hey fellas, old Jack reckons he's seen a Tasmanian tiger out by the river,' Bob Ridgeway turned his big, red face over his shoulder to yell to the other blokes.

'Bull,' said Arnold Carter. 'Old Jack's been on the white lightning again.'

Old Jack didn't like Carter, so he shut up.

'He just said so,' persisted Ridgeway. 'Didn't yer, Jack; while you was settin' traps.'

Jack didn't speak. His eyes gave an affirmative, but his shoulders looked as if hoping the head's bloody mouth would stay shut.

'Keep the cork in the kero bottle, Jack,' said Carter, who knew how to use words like the whipping end of a roll of barbed wire. Jack flinched. 'Anyone else seen a Tasmanian tiger?' Carter let the last words leer. No one spoke. Douglas shuffled the last few dance tickets, and the group began chuckling and slapping broad shoulders. Jack slipped out into the moonlight, back to his camp. No one noticed. Silly old Jack, seein' bloody tigers now. Poor old coot. Trust bloody Arnold to stick in the boot, eh!

The last Palma Waltz bleated to a close. As the hall was being packed up, Douglas cast an eye over the sheet music on the piano, but this new bloke didn't use the same stuff that the other pianist had. Whatever happened to the other fella, Douglas wondered. Some blokes just disappear. Always a bit strange, that fella. Always quiet, never quite met your eyes. Except, every now and then while he was playing, he'd look up, and you'd catch him, and wonder what he was thinking. Not about the *Pride of Erin*, that's for sure. Douglas wondered what *non, je ne regrette rien* had meant. Could foreign words tell you anything more about a man?

\* \* \*

With the new moon, the chooks began to disappear again. Sometimes Douglas would wait for the tiger in the bush. He would crouch beside the river until the dog high-stepped through the shallows to hide its track. 'Hello, Thylacine. I saw you again.' But he couldn't tramp around the bush every moonlit night pretending to track a chicken thief. Clarrie'd get sick of it.

In bed, Douglas would think of the tiger, those swift glances they had shared.

They had gotten to know each other. Douglas could see the dog's frustration in the glances now: 'Here's that man *again*.' It was almost like tipping your hat. The man would greet the beast with its name, and the beast would recognise the man, recognise the voice long before even the instant it took to find the eyes above the voice. The man became an annoyance, like a new-fallen log across a path, an owl that snatches the bandicoot you've tracked all the way from the creek. To the tiger, the man became just another night animal, and the man knew it and revelled in that pride.

Douglas lay in bed with the moon on his face, the pillow like a field of snow. Yes, it was as though the beast no longer thought of him as a man, but as an animal of the night, a clever one that would sometimes appear. Not an enemy but an equal, and, strangely, Douglas's heart strained with a feeling like ... His throat went tight. The animal was proud, but it was more than that. It was almost like ...

The blast of the shotgun rattled the window pane by Douglas's face. He sat up in bed, with that strange cry still with its hooks at his chest. He saw Clarrie with the shotgun. Clarrie turned and looked up at Douglas's moon-white face at the window.

'I just shot at a wild dog. It won't get far. There's enough blood over here to fill a bucket.' Clarrie came over to the window holding up a finger dipped in blood. 'Thought I'd better do somethin' to stop you trampin' around the bush every night.'

Douglas stared at the blood on Clarrie's finger and felt the hairs prickling under his pyjama shirt. The claw of the beast's cry slowly released, but now there was another sensation.

Moonlight nights were terrible after that. Douglas lay in bed, and the words of poems crept across his mind, trying to close up a wound with the soft stitches of the sounds and rhythms. If, in the eleven books the brothers owned, he'd found '*Tyger! Tyger! burning bright*,' he would have read it aloud and hoped that the words would heal.

But he didn't know those words, and his mind sought for words that it didn't, couldn't, know. If they'd had the seventh-grade reader, he would have found it in there, but he didn't get to reach seventh grade. He was just a bushman.

## Asleep

Kim Scott

Owen washed Pa's feet in a bowl of water. The old man got to his feet, dropped his trousers, and made Owen understand he wanted further help.

Owen adjusted the shower taps. 'Hotter, hotter,' the old man insisted as the steam rose around them.

Towelling the shivering body dry, Owen marvelled again at the swirling colours of scarred flesh. How skinny the old man was: like a skeleton draped in such strangely beautiful skin.

On the back step, in the warm sun, Owen sheared away at the old man's toenails with a great big pair of scissors. Small half-pipes of what looked more like ivory or bone fell to the cement slab at their feet.

It was habit, a routine wordlessly completed by Owen replacing the old man's socks and shoes on his feet. Pa creakily stood up, leaned on his walking stick, ran the palm of his other hand over his hair.

'C'mon,' he said, setting off with those brisk, short steps of his, and Owen padded behind him.

A TV blared sickly and bright in the curtain-drawn gloom. Someone was asleep on the lounge; a mattress on the floor held another sleeping adult, and the small child leaning into the curves of his elder momentarily shifted his eyes from the screen and smiled at them.

KIM SCOTT

Aunty Heather was at the kitchen table, just the other side of a door. 'Mmm, lookin' deadly, Dad.'

Another woman in the kitchen laughed, and the child on her lap studied Owen, before pushing its face into the woman's shoulder.

'You get paid tomorrow, for the gardening, unna?'

'I think so,' Owen guessed.

'Yes, you do,' she said, 'they wrote it down.'

She went to a drawer, brought back a slip of paper. Owen saw the names, Peter and Corry Wright, an address, and a series of dates.

'Yell out when you're going,' she called as Owen followed the old man from the room. 'I'll walk with you.'

Pa was lowering himself onto a single bed, his shoes neatly placed beneath it. The walls of the tiny room were dull with the grime of years, and stacked along one wall were layer upon layer of paintings and drawings on paper, bark, plywood, glass, and even a few on canvas. Owen thought of his own dishevelled room, the litter of paper there.

He began browsing through the top layers of paintings, and was suddenly *within* a landscape; not looking down at an image, but within it, part of it. Bewildered, he looked up to the sky, and became merely a viewer again, outside, looking down upon.

Quickly, he turned to the next painting.

'You been there,' the old man said. 'Remember?' The bush was full of energy, colour, scents. Owen heard the humming drone of bees, felt the warm sun, the cool shade. The freshly rained-upon earth. 'You been there,' the old man said again, 'but never like that. See, all the flowers coming up together, all the seasons at once.'

Many of the paintings – a paddock of sheep, a large rock among trees, a bitumen road cutting through mallee – had a trail of footprints in them, sometimes wandering across, sometimes away from the foreground, out of the frame altogether, or appearing in the distance. There were other drawings of odd, hybrid creatures: various combinations of machines, plants, animals, humans. There were animated skeletons, skyscrapers crumbling in weak sunlight, a telephone booth leaning at a crossroad ...

'C'mon,' the old man said. 'One of our stories. Give it to me in lingo.'

Owen took the empty chair from beside the bed and, reversing it between his legs, leaned his arms across its back and dropped his eyes from the old man's gaze. Pa closed his eyes.

No words came to Owen.

After a few minutes he exhaled his relief. The old man was asleep.

\*

Corry paused at the nursery doorway, savouring the backyard before entering it. Our home, our office, our lab and garden, she thought. Our skills. It was as if they – Peter and Corry – were fated to care for the amazing creature they'd found. Who better?

She and Peter had left the creature in a hutch by the balga trees and a clump of granite rocks, hoping to provide shelter, familiarity, even a degree of emotional and psychological comfort, voicing such words and concepts without hesitation.

Now Corry saw that the stem of one of the balgas lay on the ground some distance from where Peter crouched with his back to her, studying what appeared to be the remains of a small fire. There was no sign of the creature.

Peter turned, startled at the sound of her footsteps, and grinned weakly.

'What's wrong?' she mewed.

Peter's hand waved across the broken balga stem, the fire and the set of tracks leading to a hole in the soft soil between granite rocks.

'I think it must've burrowed in there.'

'We'll have to get it out. If it can dig that far ...'

'It can't escape. The mesh of the fence goes right down.'

'We don't even know what this is, Peter. We can't lose it, not now.'

'But you've seen it. I've got as much chance of digging out of here with my bare hands.'

'But look, that hole. It's like a burrow. How far ...?'

'We'll dig it out. Shovels.'

Suddenly they were wrapped in smoke, each isolated and utterly alone. Coughing, blind and befuddled, they dropped to

their hands and knees. Then, just as suddenly as it had come, the smoke cleared. Eyes streaming with tears, grateful to be breathing easily again, they helped one another to their feet. What had happened? Where did that smoke come from?

Peter thought it was the grass tree.

'Must've been smouldering, sparks from the campfire,' Peter suggested. They looked at a tiny pile of ash.

'And the wind.' Corry was workshopping this latest phenomenon, trying to help. 'The wind must've fed it. Thick though, wasn't it, that smoke?'

They dragged their fingers along gummy, charred flakes of wood. 'You know how this stuff burns.'

How fragrant it is.

'When it's dry, anyway.'

'But it went out so quickly.'

'Lucky for us.'

'Yeah, just as well.'

'We'll still have to dig it out, check anyway,' said Corry, and went to get a shovel.

She called out to Peter only a few minutes later. And then a second time, louder. Did she sound distressed?

'What now?' Peter went to her. How strange, he thought, slowing as he saw her at the entrance to the shed. How strange that she should stand so motionless, slumped and with her head down like that. Then he saw the red eyes, the creature staring from beneath Corry's armpit.

Corry had still not lifted her head. 'It's hurting me.'

The creature's face – smeared with yellow pus, eyes foggy and dim – was almost unrecognisable from the day before. It was breathing heavily, phlegm clicking, and muttered something which was, initially at least, incomprehensible. But then Peter and Corry heard, so clear it might have been their own voices, 'Let us be,' followed by what seemed echoes, other voices whispering, 'Allow us,' and 'Listen.'

It grabbed Corry and yanked her to her knees, but as she dropped Peter lunged across and caught the creature by the neck. Immediately it slumped, passive in his grasp, and Peter easily hauled it across Corry's back.

Yet when Corry turned the creature was sitting on Peter's

chest with its hands at his throat, and Peter was gurgling, his legs kicking fitfully.

Corry swung the shovel.

She helped her husband to his feet, and they stood holding one another, looking at the creature she had knocked unconscious. Neither of them mentioned what they'd heard. Each, as they brushed themselves down, adjusted and pulled themselves tighter, dismissed what they might have heard as a fantasy, something heard only inside his or her head, some product of individual imagination and stress.

There were some things you had to do. Just got up and did.

The creature stirred and, silently operating as a single unit, Peter and Corry roped, buckled, shackled the creature so that when it regained consciousness it would endanger neither them nor itself.

'Umm ...'

They turned around.

Who?

Ah yes, the gardener: a doughy, soft young man, and his grandfather: dark, all angles and sinew and shabby, formal cloth. The younger held up a hand; in it the key they'd given him to enter the yard, but both he and the old man were staring, their eyes large in their heads and their mouths agape. The old man took a step back.

'Naatj,' he said.

The creature turned its head to him, struggled. Peter and Corry tightened their grip on it. They'd have to give it another sedative. Get the dose right.

'Back in a minute,' muttered Peter and, bundling the creature in his arms, he left the garden.

'What did you say? What did you call it?' Corry asked, as when someone has hidden the answer you seek.

Pa looked at Owen, Owen at him.

The old man grinned. 'Oh, "Naatj." I said, "Naatj nitjak."'

\*

'Naatj?'

'Yeah.'

'Did you ask him what he meant?'

Corry's mouth tightened, her face twitched.

'Sorry,' Peter said, hands up to fend off her anger. 'But ...'

'Of course I did, but he wouldn't say.'

'What were they doing here anyway?'

'It was his day. I forgot, didn't ring him to cancel. The old man often comes along with him, sits in the garden. He knows the language names of all the plants, what you might use some of them for, what lives in them. He's his grandfather.'

'Grandfather? You wouldn't think it, not by the look at them.'

\*

Owen and Pa were long gone. They'd turned tail; not a dignified exit, what with the old man being so creaky and stiff, so clumsy in layers and layers of clothing and Owen bobbing around him like a balloon on a string. They kept putting their hands on one another, pushing and grabbing, turning in circles. Corry swept past and opened the gate for them. Their motor wouldn't start, but they'd parked on a hill so they let it roll, and with a yelp of its tyres the car jumped to life, snarled and coughed.

The old man's head nodded as the car jerked, the motor stammering and coughing, gathering its rhythm. He'd turned away from Corry, hunched his shoulders and withdrawn into his clothing yet as he was swept away Corry, waving goodbye, saw his dark, almost skeletal hand emerge from the window, flapping, rotating at the wrist as if caught by the wind, by the car's momentum.

Owen's eyes were fixed on the road ahead.

*Tjanak. Balyet. Mambera, or mammari. Djimbar. Woodartji.* The old man intoned the words, his voice almost disembodied, emanating from a bundle of cloth, listing the names of supposedly mythical and spiritual creatures. Owen leaned into the steering wheel, worked the gear shift.

The structure of his own life was returning: him and the old man, the business of driving a car, the gardening job, navigating here and there, the pleasure of being in that garden ... There was a pattern to it, and he found comfort in settling into what must be habitual activities. But it was small, there was not much substance to it, and this talk of *tjanak*, of *djimbar* and *balyet* and *woodatji* and the old man's consternation threatened to unravel it, to pull it apart.

'None of them but,' the old man said. 'Course some people get 'em all mixed up; tjanak can be any kind, balyet is sort of like a man but not. Mambera – mammari them others say – is the little one. Woodartji too.'

'But it's not none of them, is it?'

Nope, it wasn't.

'We talked about this on those tapes, unna?'

Owen would have to search the tapes to discover that memory.

'Tjanak, some people called wadjelas that early days, cause how they didn't know nothing, or how to behave properly. Some tjanak, they got spears sticking out from their knees, or funny feet, all kinds of tjanak ... Might be like a big dog. Cannibals some of 'em.

'My old girl, my wife (rest in peace), she woke up and a mambera sitting on her. On her hip, she said, she was lying on her side, see. She didn't open her eyes, but put her hand out and it was like, like a hairy thing but been shaved. Prickly, stubble you know. She couldn't walk properly for months after that ...'

Of course Pa was wondering what they'd seen, that strange creature, tied up and unconscious; if it hadn't struggled he wouldn't even have seen it. He was sure it had responded to the sound of his voice.

'Lots of Noongars,' the old man's thin wrists and neck, twigs and stems held in layers of cotton and wool, in shirts and jumpers and coat, 'they're frightened. You know, get back home before dark or mambera'll get you.

'But not me. Lots of times you could say things to 'em if you know the right way to speak, know the language. When I was a little boy, mambera tried to get me to follow him, but I wouldn't go. So you know what? He followed me home. Woke up, and he was sitting just outside our tent. I didn't tell no one. No one else saw him. He was sitting on the bedroom windowsill when I woke up 'nother morning at my wadjela friend's house. Little fella, hairy – not the wadjela, the mambera I mean. I just ignored him. He went away after a couple of days. Never seen him again.

'Not like this one, but. Different from this one here ...'

They'd stopped in traffic, a line of cars before them waiting

to move across the intersection. Pa lowered his window a fraction, and breathed deeply.

'I never seen nothin' like it, 'cept maybe one time – I told you, unna – when I was getting gilgie and I saw its reflection, looking at itself same as I was in the water. Standing behind me.' He laughed. 'I took off that time, same as anyone would. Didn't look back. Wish I'd stayed now.

'Go there tomorrow, do their garden, unna?'

'Mmm.' They moved slowly now, only metres at a time, stop and start, caught in traffic. They halted again. Nice car, thought Owen, glancing to one side, changing radio stations, studying people though a series of windscreens.

\*

Owen made two large papier-mâché figures, and left them in the sun to dry. Apparently, he'd planned this; Auntie had said as much, and he'd seen his sketches and notes. The lifeless figures slumped now just outside the circle of firelight enclosing Owen, Pa and Auntie Heather.

'When I was a kid,' she was saying, stroking the hair of the sleepy child on her lap, 'there was a TV show. *The Magic Boomerang*.' She mimed throwing a boomerang, and indicated its spinning flight with her hand. 'They musta got the idea from Aboriginal people, cause someone would throw a boomerang in the air, and time would stop. No blackfellas on the TV, though, not then anyway. Not our kind.'

Owen remembered, in a story the old man once told him: a boomerang, spinning in the air, otherwise motionless in the air and just out of reach, looking like a pool of water in the sky.

Memories, thought Owen. I feel so far from home.

He tilted his head back. The moon commanding the sky, clusters of stars at a distance, and all around him the dark pyramids of roofs.

'She rung, said yeah come tomorrow.'

Pa poked at the fire with his walking stick.

\*

'Naatj,' I said, 'Naatj nitjak, nitjak naatj,' like saying, 'What,' you know, 'What's this,' cause I didn't know, and I *don't* know,

and you may as well say, "Little shit-stirrer," for all I know, cause as for me ...'

'Well, but mammari and that, you think they're real ...'

'Mambera – well, some say mammari – and yes, well, true. They're real.'

Peter hoped Pa would continue, but muffled in clothes and with gloves covering his scarred hands Pa just repeated 'True,' and looked at them all, one at a time. Owen dropped his gaze, Auntie Heather and Corry smiled, to show all was well.

'Well, there's no doubt about this, this one is real,' and Peter gestured through the observation window recently installed in the wall shared by laboratory and office.

'Naatj.'

Barely conscious, wedged in cushions and blankets in a corner, the creature suddenly looked up, and Owen felt himself recoil a little from the intensity – even from within a veil of drugs – of the creature's brief glance.

'It's real,' Peter repeated. 'We can care for it, help it. It's not just research for us!'

'Fair enough anyway,' said Pa. 'It's a free country, they reckon, since whiteman found it.'

'It's real, but we can't make out quite what. First, we have to heal it.'

'It's my country,' Pa was adamant, 'where you got this, and you don't need to talk to anyone else: no government, no other Noon-gars, nothing. They know jack shit. I'm the Native Title Claimant down there. I'm the Traditional Custodian.'

Peter and Corry appreciated the convenience of dealing with one man. They'd tried before to establish Indigenous reference groups for their projects, and had consulted various Indigenous bureaucracies, only to be met half-heartedly. However, just as soon as something tangible came up they'd suddenly find themselves swamped with countless and competing claimants and custodians. So yeah, there'd be other stakeholders. Eventually. Sometime.

Peter insisted, 'We want to do this right. You've got your rights, and we want you involved.'

'But just now,' said Corry, 'we need to give ourselves time, keep it sedated, find what it needs to be comfortable. Find out, really, everything we can.'

'And we need to keep it quiet, that it's here, I mean,' Peter added. 'That's part of the fee, the consultancy fee. Confidentiality.'

Pa nodded. Auntie Heather said, 'Yeah, well ... That's right, we can do that. And the boy keeps up the gardening, and maybe you can let him help you out with ...'

'Naatj,' said Corry, quickly.

'Good a name as any right now,' Peter laughed.

'Naatj,' said Owen, to himself really, as he left the room. Unobserved, the creature lifted its head.



## Letter to A

*Alice Pung*

You ripped down the wallpaper one day when you were fourteen, ripped it right off the walls all four of them and then stuck up posters all over the room to hide the scabby paint. One day it will get painted over, you told yourself. One day the broken window will get fixed. One day the carpets will get changed. One day the ceiling will not fall down. One day the cracks will not be there, one day the smell will not be there, and when that day comes you will be out. Out of there. You will not be there to see it all. One day you will be out of there and one day you will live a freshly whitewashed life. Yes you will, and the ceiling will no longer peel and fall on top of you and these four walls will no longer close in on you, and you will have cauterised your wants.

There is a depression in the wall. These depressions come about when your knuckles itch and your upper delroids ache to exert themselves and your mind is nothing but a blank black hole screaming to see red, that is when you strike and don't think of the consequences. This is when your inarticulate rage causes you to bunch up your fist and punch the wall so hard that the clock falls down on the other side, since there is no one to listen to your choked half-finished sentences about a cousin, a cousin who was once like a brother but is now nothing more than crap for all you care, a cousin so far gone that you don't think of the money he has borrowed from you or the money he owes you, the money to get out, you do not think about it at all because you do

ALICE PUNG

not want to think about him. To think about him is to stumble down the path of despair and once you are on that path, you have to keep running, keep running or else if you stop and pause to see what direction you are going, you will sink to your knees and realise how much you need water, water like the water bottles they carry down the streets of Richmond and you can always tell which ones are the ones on the habit because of these water bottles.

We were powerpoints, powerpoints with the three holes, two that slanted upwards and one that was a straight stroke down, straight and narrow and sad, like the prospect of some of us spending the rest of our lives doing Powerpoint presentations because our names are Andrew Chan and we wear glasses and sit in front of our PCs after school each evening because our parents want us to study hard and become successful, because this is a land of great opportunity and we must not waste it, it is a land of great fairness where even Ah Chan selling BanCao at the market in Saigon can raise a son who can decipher strange symbols in front of a screen merely by pressing many buttons in different combinations on a black pad, and it assures him to hear the clackity clack noise like an old abacus coming from his son's room, because then he knows that his son knows more than he does. Old Ah Chan doesn't have a clue about what the information superhighway is, all he knows is that there are no casualties, none at all, and that it can only go up from here. And so he buys his son the magic machine with the cloplop buttons and with a few clackity clacks and clicks he can transport himself to a nice office and a house in the suburbs and a shiny new blue Mazda.

Chink is an insult, but chink is also the sound that money makes as it rattles in your father's pockets, it is also the sound that those machines at the casino make when he hits the jackpot, so chink is not necessarily too bad a word. Chink is the only word that governs the life of your father, chink chink chink of the coins in the gaming machine, chink chink chink one at a time and not all at once, and so he sits there to wait for the sound of all-at-once chinks, meanwhile at home the boy and the mother and the kid brother sit together for a dinner of rice and vegetables and bits of beef before parting to play computer games or watch Chinese serials in separate rooms. You go off to your room

and turn up the music, real loud music, and you look at the white wall which you had determined to paint a mural on, 'cause your art teacher says that you have real talent, but what the hell, what now? What is determination now, when the father won't come back and when the father won't stop spending the money and won't stop believing in the glorious sound of the chinkchinkchink of the machine.

A steady beat of chinks from the coins in his pocket, waiting for the rapid succession of chinkchinkchinks like the quickening of a heartbeat until the glorious rushing sound cannot be separated into its individual tinkles but all pours forth like a mad gold rush.

This is a different gold rush from the gold rush of the nineteenth century when we men had to carry heavy buckets and sift away to find the little pieces, and we needed strong stomachs to swallow the pieces and keen eyes to sift through the processes of our digestive tracts to find that little hard lump.

Meanwhile, swallow that lump in your throat you big sook, 'cause big boys aren't sooks goddam it, and look at your comic books and pictures of *Dragonball Z* and pick up the phone to call the number of that little pale-faced girl with the dark eyes and the black hair, even if she makes you write her letters instead of wanting to talk in person. Let the phone ring and ring and goddam is there anyone home? Keep your finger on the little soft grey 'off' button on the cordless phone in case her parents pick up and interrogate you worse than those Mao guards during the bloody cultural revolution that would not leave your family alone, that sent them to Vietnam, and then to this new land where little white-faced girls with black hair laugh at your stories of killing chickens in the Guangzhou countryside, and all your history becomes a funny after-dinner anecdote. Others would see your acts as barbaric, and squeeze their clean faces into squished looks of shudder-shake – 'eww, how gross' – even as they are seated opposite you eating a McChicken burger or severing the joints of the skinny bones of KFC chicken-wings with shiny fingers.

And so you lie on your bed in your room waiting for the father to come home, and you can hear the sound of your mother's footsteps padding to the kitchen to wash the dishes from dinner. You sit up and decide to write the girl a letter, a poem even,

although you know all of this means nothing to you even though the girl means something to you, little ivory-faced girl in a tower. Grab a few sheets of Reflex paper, A4, nothing fancy. Goddam if the girl is expecting perfumed notepaper, well this was the best she was going to get and she had better be happy with it. Bloody hell how are you going to do this when you couldn't give a damn about this decomposed Keats your English teacher keeps mentioning?

Words are there to convey action, not an endless quagmire of feelings, and whatever you are feeling is transformed into action. And that is why for the life of you, you can't understand why the girl will not go out with you and all she wants to do is to write these bloody letters to you and wants you to write these bloody letters back to her. The surest way to get to know a person is to meet them, and take them out in your car with your recently attained Ps, God you are proud of these plates, and ask her questions but not too many, and do something fun like going to a movie or something.

But this girl, she's a strange girl. You wonder whether you should pursue her, whether this stupid poem will persuade her to actually go out with you. Grant you that date so you can be with someone for once and not have to say a word and just forget about things and have fun. But this girl, this girl looks like she can't have fun. Something about the look in her eyes, as if she is a little scared of what she sees in the world around her. Like she spends a lot of time thinking about why it is all so terrifying, and keeping quiet about her answers. You have no time for enigmas, you want to get out there and get some action, although not necessarily from this girl, because she is a good girl. You are sick to death of sitting still, of doing nothing.

You pick up the phone again and dial the number of the girl. 'Hello?' Ah, the familiar voice, you can imagine her now, sitting at her desk, which is where you imagine her to be, if you are not imagining her in other more pleasant places that suit your fancy but probably not her reality. You have called to chat to get your mind off things, but she does not want to chat, this girl. She wants to talk, goddam it why is it that the stereotype is true, why do women always want to talk about feelings and shit as if these feelings will change anything?

*Letter to A*

Dingdong. That's the bell. The father is home, the mother must be lying in bed, wide awake. You swear you can almost hear the bedsprings creak as she gets up. Creak creak. You can certainly hear the footsteps, the creak creak snap snap of the tendons of her feet and ankles as she shuffles to the door. You wonder whether the little brother is asleep, and whether he is going to wake up this evening. You wait to hear the inevitable question. 'Where have you been?' Even though your mother knows the answer she asks it anyway.

She can see the chinkchinkchink in his eyes, see the bags beneath. Dark bags beneath carrying phantasmagoric gold coins. He blinks once or twice, and the illusion is gone. He is tired. So tired. The bags hang down to his cheekbones, they become bags of bones, he *is* a bag of bones. 'How much did you use?' your mother demands. 'How much did you lose?' the terms are interchangeable, and it doesn't matter which one comes out.

'I'm hungry, woman, haven't had dinner yet,' the sad man in the old brown leather jacket with the elastic at the bottom grumbles.

'If you came home earlier, you wouldn't have to eat leftovers,' grumbles the mother, as she shuffles to the kitchen, but she brings out the beef from the stove, the beef she would not let you eat too much of because she was saving it for him.

## Purchase

*John Kinsella*

They had their hearts set on purchasing a piece of land up north, but not too far north. Coastal – or as near coastal as they might afford. Close to a town for supplies, but not too close to a town: they wanted privacy and a sense of having 'got away' from it all. This wasn't really a 'sea change' (as the trendies and media would have it) – going down to the city had been that, for them. They were country people who'd retired from the farm early and given the city a go. Now they wanted out. But not a place on a large scale. A small property of, say, thirty acres. Grow a few olives, keep a few sheep for hobby shearing, nothing more.

A suitable block came up not long after their search began. They visited a small town close to the Batavia Coast, and had a chat with the local real-estate agent. There was nothing up in the sales window, but she had her ear to the ground, as real-estate agents do, and knew of a property about to go on the market. The owners had only had it for a year, so it was good luck they were selling – land in the region was at a premium and much sought after. There was a waiting list but, recognising like minds – she was a farmer's daughter – and the prospect of cash on the button, she 'juggled' her list.

The boy watched his dad's car emerge out of the setting sun and speed down the gravel driveway, the back end dropping out in clouds of dust, then pulled back into line. Perched on his trail

bike on the hill, he glanced across at the people walking the neighbouring property with the real-estate agent. He revved the engine and dropped the clutch, spinning the back wheel and kicking dirt and stones out towards the newcomers. They were too far away to be hit by the debris, but not too far to sense some kind of aggression. They stared at the boy zigzagging over the crest of the hill – that bare property next door ... not a tree on it.

For a moment, the couple basked in the neat mixture of clear space and white gums they were buying. And they had (for in their minds it was already theirs) a small hill as well – looked like an old mine on the far side, to the east, but it'd been filled in or blasted shut. The estate agent said she didn't know much about it, but could guarantee it was entirely sealed and there was no risk of sheep wandering in and being lost. An ex-farmer, the man – or Darl, as his wife called him – took a close look, and agreed. *Perfectly safe!* At the access road end of the property – to the west – there was a creek, dry mid-summer. Plenty of water too: a well had been sunk and there was a dam in the western corner which would catch the entire flow off their hill, and off their neighbour's. The couple was going to sign off on the deal that evening – one last wander around and chat with the agent.

The boy's dad had only had a few drinks after work, and was in a sardonic yet almost pleasant mood. The boy had to tell him now. If he left it, his dad would go spare. It was the boy's job to keep a look-out. And then, if Dad was really pissed when he discovered for himself – because he would, because all the blokes at the pub were his dad's spies and they'd know quick as lightning – he'd give him a good kicking for holding back the info.

*Dad, I saw that bitch real-estate agent with some new people.* The boy steadily ripped open a Coke and kept his eyes to himself. The fizz of the can would be the prelude to ... *Jeez! What now?! Can't get any privacy round this fucking place. Get rid of one lot and another rolls in. Bitch! Fucking bitch! I've got her number ... give it time, give it time.* His dad stopped there and the boy knew the silence meant his dad did have a plan for the real-estate agent. She'd keep. And when his dad fixed things, he really fixed things. In

the meantime, he sensed his dad switch attention to the problem immediately at hand.

Taking a bottle of spirits from the cupboard, the bearded miner called the boy to get his lazy carcass into the kitchen and cook him a steak. That was the night Dad was supposed to eat at the pub before getting home. The boy looked after himself on these nights – he was good at that. Even though he only had his dad – his mum had gone a long time back – he liked it out on the block alone. He was never scared ... only when his dad got back from the pub. The boy started to walk towards his room. *Hey, where do you think you're going? Cook your dad a steak!*

To get their new place started, the couple went south to Batavia and picked up an old donga from a construction company. It was to be delivered in a few weeks – enough time to clear a pad for it, and sort out the details of their move from the city. The plan was to live in the donga for as long as it took to get their new house established. They'd always wanted to build.

Though Batavia was much further away than the small town where the real-estate agent plied her trade, they stayed in a motel down there because it was easier to get things done. They arranged for workers to go up and build the pad – being on site to ensure it went in the right place, of course. Choosing to work with an architect to design the plans themselves, they shopped around builders for the best product. It was an exciting time, though – somewhat ironically – one during which they barely had a chance to be at the new place.

The couple was out there to see the donga set to rest. And it was then they met the boy on the trail bike ... heard his dad yelling in the distance. A stream of abuse they were unable to interpret. They thought the dad drunk and best avoided. Nonetheless, it was an exquisite day, and it reminded them of their best times on the farm. After the harvest cheque was in, and they didn't have to worry about money for a while. That kind of feeling. And the pressures of the city were gone. Down there, drunks were never far away either – it was no big deal.

But what the boy had to say bothered them a little. Darl more than his wife. *Pet*, he said to her, *these neighbours aren't all there.*

Purchase

*They're a few planks short of a jetty.* He enjoyed sayings like that. He always smiled after using them, even when concerned. To be honest, Darl thought it bullshit and was suspicious of the kid anyway. Looked like a dope smoker. You get them on small properties – Darl hadn't come down in the last shower. But given the place next door didn't have a bit of green on it, he reasoned the boy wasn't growing it there, and that was all he cared about.

The boy was nervous, even frantic around his father. *So I told them like you said, Dad. I told them it was an old lead mine and that the tailings are all over the block. That the place is poison. That there's lead in the well-water. Just like I told the other people.*

*And what happened?* his dad growled.

*I think it worked. The old girl looked scared and the bloke with a pole up his arse stared at me without saying anything. Their names are Pet and Darl. I've heard them call each other that.*

The boy's dad laughed and then repeated to himself, *Pet and Darl ... Pet and Darl ... bloody dickheads.*

Then, dead quiet. The boy watched his father, trying hard not to tap his foot or do anything else that'd set the burly miner off.

*Bastards*, the drunken miner muttered. *Bastards ... sticking that eyesore there without so much as a by-your-leave. Who do they think they are? Squatters? The landed fucking gentry?* He then started yelling again, punching a fist into a hand: *No neighbours! No neighbours! No neighbours!* The corellas, scratching at the dirt and eyeing the neighbours' spread, squawked en masse and plumed into the air, settling on the other side of the fence.

Pet rang the real-estate agent just to check about the abandoned 'lead mine.' The voice hesitated only slightly on the other end. *Don't worry about it, the kid's got a mental problem ... He's known in town for making up stories. Always being suspended from school. My daughter knows him ... says he's weird. Don't worry, though. I think he's harmless.* Pet could tell the agent was clutching at straws.

The prospect of coexistence – even distantly – with a drunk and a weird kid distracted them from the lead business. Darl

JOHN KINSELLA

there were in fact lead mines throughout the area, and that lead had been detected in local well-water. Dogs had died from it. She insisted. He said: *Well, we haven't got any dogs and we haven't got any small children ...* She could hear that he was becoming a farmer again.

But Pet wouldn't let it go. She couldn't. And as they stood in their donga looking out at a blood-red sunset, the drunk next door screaming across the distance, in ragged bursts that punctuated lulls in the fresh sea-breeze: *No neighbours! No neighbours! No neighbours!* She caught Darl's eye twitching – a sign that he was reaching the end of his tolerance. He wasn't a violent man, but still he had a temper. He'd give that drunken neighbour a run for his money, then there'd be real trouble. Pet felt it in her waters. *Well, the town has been drinking the water for a hundred years, so I think we'll survive,* Darl said suddenly, and calmly. As if that was that, and there'd be no more talk about the matter. Gradually they both decided they couldn't care less about the lead. Even if it were true, they'd live there. They had once been farmers. Back then, they had saturated their paddocks and animals in poison every year. *What was the difference? Real-estate agents will say anything.* They remained proud of their purchase.

The donga had been there for a few weeks and workers were already laying the house-pad. The boy's father was mumbling something about the next phase of the operation. The night before, he'd fired rifle shots into the air and played the stereo extra loud.

Funny thing was, the boy had watched the donga being set in place with a dull excitement – almost creeping skin – as the crane hoisted the donga from the semitrailer. Overwidth, overlength. The cops were there – a car out front, a car behind the load. That'd cost them. And he'd watched in amazement as the ground was levelled for the pad. The boy liked how *precise* it all was. The old couple – *Pet and Darl* he drawled their names sarcastically, mimicking his father – weren't there much, but when they were he rode along the fence-line on his motorbike, revving

have been the easterly that had whipped in, hot and burning though it was only spring.

When the truck and workers and new owners were gone, the boy rode his trail bike up to a tear in the fence and wormed the bike through. He rode over to the mine, got off, and threw tailings at the crumpled and suffocated entry. Phase two of his dad's plan to cleanse the district of invaders. Then he mounted up and raced down to the creek. He leant his head so far back he nearly fell off his bike – he was looking up at the sun through white gum leaves, the oil of the trees headier than dope. His dad was a smart man.

It was an 'earthquake-proofed' house. A steel frame with single brick and plasterboard walls, built on a sand pad. The boy was fascinated. He rode over and asked the builders about it. Dad was at work and he was wagging school, so it would be OK. He was bored. *Earthquake-proof, eh? We haven't had an earthquake here, I don't think*, he said to them. A gnarled and bearded builder with tobacco stains around his mouth and moustache, said:

*Well, some people like to be prepared, matey. The builder asked the boy to pass him his beer, cool in its foam holder. Yep, nothing like working in the bush, he said, no problem drinking on the job. He hacked and spat as he laughed.*

The builder paused as he set a string for a new line of bricks, and said to the boy, who was rocking his bike back and forth so its wheels bit into the dirt, *So you've been a bit of a bastard to my employers? The boy looked away and said: My dad doesn't like neighbours.*

*Yeah, well your dad's being an arsehole.* The boy shot a look back at the builder and sized up the opposition: the guy was built like a brick shithouse. Ten axe handles across. Sunburnt and milky-eyed with drink. But still sharp. The boy wanted to say something back, but hit the kick-start with his boot and throttled up, spewing sand all over the place as he raced back to the hole in the fence.

The boy stared at his dad spread-eagled on the couch, watching television. *What are you staring at, you little bastard?* his father half-asked him.

*Nothing. They're putting the roof on the place next door. Who gives a damn, his dad muttered, taking the boy by surprise. Dad looked strange. It worried the boy.*

Darl and Pet were living in the donga, waiting for their house to be completed. It wouldn't be long now. The summer had set in and it was getting pretty hot even through the nights – they craved the ducted airconditioning they'd had installed in their dream home. The power was through, and they'd made the massive outlay to have scheme water put on. Darl said: *It's not because of this bull about the quality of groundwater around here, just that it's more reliable.* It was late, and in the cramped space they were watching television, doing dishes and talking over the plans when there was a knock at the door. The husband called out: *Who's there?*

*It's me, from next door ...* The couple looked at each other.

*Don't open it,* Pet said. Darl looked at her for slightly too long, then shook his head and went to open it. The boy was standing on the step shaking. His hair was slicked to his forehead with sweat. *What's happened?* asked Darl. Pet was behind her husband's shoulder now, and seeing the boy, pushed her way through and placed her hand on his arm. *What's wrong, son? What's happened?*

*It's my Dad. He's sick. I mean he's really sick. I think he needs a doctor and the phone isn't working. I mean, Dad broke the phone when he got in from work.*

Darl didn't mind paying the extra for scheme water to be piped out to the place. Cost thousands, but peace of mind is peace of mind. Probably nothing wrong, but why go through the worry? The real-estate agent's sister – a nurse at the hospital – said tests showed there was nothing wrong with the groundwater. That's what the real-estate agent reckoned. But what the hell. And when Darl suggested to the boy's dad he connect his place to the scheme for a few thousand, the ex-drunk surprisingly said yes. *I can taste the bloody water now, he mumbled. When we ran out of rainwater, the well-water tasted pretty bad, didn't it boy?*

*Yes, Dad.*

His dad stared at his boots and then added, *Nothing wrong with it, though ... just that my tastebuds are shot, like my liver.*

*Purchase*

Darl spent a lot of time at the old lead mine. Sometimes the boy would come over on his trail bike. He'd dismount and they'd squat near each other without saying a word. It smelt strong, even heady up there in the heat ... assaying the lead tailings, listening to the pasture crackle with the dryness, watching oddly-coloured sunsets. Sometimes Darl would ask after the boy's dad. *Oh, he's OK, the boy would say. He keeps saying his liver's shot and that's why he got sick. When one of his mates rings and tries to get Dad to go out on the piss, he just says, can't mate, doc says my liver's shot.*

After a while, Darl and the boy would hear Pet calling up from the new house – or the 'mansion,' as the boy called it: *Hey, boys, come down and have something to eat and drink.*

It was as if they were the only people in the world. It would always be like that.

*Griffith Review*

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## Australia Day

The M1 is busy. Some vehicles—four-wheel drives and utes mainly—have Australian flags flying from their windows. Jess sits perfectly erect at the wheel, the same way she sits in lectures. A lamenting electropop hit is on the radio. The singer's howl cuts through the rattle of the 1987 Toyota Celica.

'Did you know that forty per cent of people who fly Australian flags would still support the White Australia policy?' Stanley asks when the song has finished.

The air conditioner is broken and beads of sweat catch in the hairs on Jessica's upper lip.

'Did you know that ninety per cent of statistics are made up on the spot?' she says.

'Saw it on the ABC.'

'Then it must be true,' Jess laughs. Her flaxen hair flaps against her cheeks. 'My dad has an Australian flag bumper sticker. What does that say about him?'

'The research looked at flags, not stickers. It would be wrong for me to extrapolate.'

A moth meets its messy demise on the windscreen. Powdered wings smear the glass.

'You're one of us now, remember? Got the native plant and everything.'

Stanley thinks of the once scarlet banksia plant, now draped in cobwebs on his balcony. Jess had come along for the citizenship ceremony. She'd worn a tangerine dress and dangly earrings.

'He's going to hate me, isn't he?' Stanley asks.

Jess waves a finger at the glove box. 'Pass me my sunnies.'

Stanley finds the glasses case beneath a packet of ribbed-for-her-pleasure condoms. Another one of Eddie's relics - lately Stanley has been unearthing them everywhere.

'Well?' he says.

Jess clears her throat. It is the first time, in two hours of driving, that Stanley has heard her cough.

'Deep down, Dad's just a big cuddly teddy bear.'

Eddie Mitchell studies medicine, like the rest of them. He is smart - he made the dean's honours list three years in a row - and good-looking (in a goofy, barefoot, Queensland

kind of way). Everybody loves him. Even Stanley, who is no match for that easy Sunshine Coast smile. If it weren't for Eddie, Stanley tells himself, he never would have found Jess that day at the anatomical pathology lab, bent over a glass box of dissected hands.

'Hi,' he'd said, all casual, as if sidling up to her at a bar.

'Piss off.'

'Stanley Chu. Nice to meet you.'

Jess ignored him. She examined the pool of mucus - a mixture of tears and snot - on the toilet paper in her palm. Stanley pulled up a stool. The metal legs made a grating noise across the linoleum floor. He sat down, and together they stared at the bodiless forearms, waving up at them from the box.

'Flexor pollicis longus,' Stanley said, pointing at a label pinned to one of the specimens. 'It should be flexor pollicis longus, not flexor carpi radialis.'

In tutes they were studying the neck and thorax. Jess had no idea about the upper limb.

'I've taken it up with my anatomy tutor,' he said. 'She's going to relabel it on Monday.'

Jess looked at Stanley's poreless skin and shiny almond-shaped eyes.

'Aren't you in my anatomy class?' she asked.

He blushed.

'You jiggle your leg on the stool.'

Stanley steadied his knee.

'It's annoying.' Jess shivered. Sun was pouring through the windows, but the laboratory felt unnaturally cool. 'How come you know upper limb already?'

'I got bored and read ahead.'

'Seriously? When I get bored I go for a coffee, or a bike ride. Something fun.'

'The brachial plexus is pretty extraordinary,' Stanley said, and his black eyes flashed wide. 'I could teach you about it sometime.' Stanley had memorised Jessica's student number. He knew that last semester, in anatomy, she had scraped by with 55. It was a passing grade, but only just.

Jessica said nothing.

'Red tits don't come back,' he said, and then, seeing the bewildered expression on her face, explained, 'It's a mnemonic: roots, trunks, divisions, cords, branches.'

'That's a relief. I wasn't sure what kind of tits you were talking about.'

They laughed. Stanley looked down at the macerated tissue in Jessica's hand.

'Why were you crying before?'

Jessica's smile evaporated. Everybody, including Stanley, knew that Eddie Mitchell had cheated on her with Stephanie Hubbard.

'It's not important.'

And in this cold glass room of formaldehyde-infused

body parts where a tit was a bird and nothing more, it wasn't.

A couple of heifers look up with mild interest as the crimson Celica rattles past. When the car reaches a letterbox fashioned from a milk can, Jess takes a sharp left turn. The hatchback splutters up the gravel driveway.

'I told you to get rid of that shitbox years ago!' Jessica's father bellows when they park in front of the house.

'Stanley,' Jess says, jumping out of the car, 'meet my dad. Dairy farmer and Ford Falcon tragic, Neville Cook.'

Neville stricks his pink, large-pored face up against the dusty glass. He grins. 'Pleased to meet you.'

Behind him stands an older version of Jessica—shorter and rounder but with the same broad, gap-toothed smile. She wears an apron, which reads *This hen cooks from scratch*, and has one arm around a long-haired teen.

Stanley gets out of the car as Jess slams her door shut.

'Let me look at you,' the woman says, letting go of the boy to grab her daughter with floury hands. She holds Jess at an arm's length and then, as if unable to bear the distance, pulls her into a tight embrace. 'Don't they feed you at these residential colleges? Never mind. We'll fatten you up. I've got your favourite, tuna casserole, in the oven. And apple pie for dessert.'

Stanley shifts his feet. His bladder is ready to burst. He'd

looked respectable when they left Melbourne, but now his clothes are wet with sweat. Thankfully, nobody—except, perhaps, the only teenager—takes much notice of him. They are too busy retrieving Jessica's duffel bag from the car and marvelling at the latest—*What is that? Strawberry blond?*—colour of her hair. It is really only when the family sits down to dinner that anybody remembers Stanley is there.

'When did the First Fleet arrive in Australia?'

'Twenty-sixth of January, seventeen eighty-eight.'

They were in Stanley's studio apartment on Spencer Street, swotting up for his citizenship test.

'I bet most *Australians*,' Jessica said, making quotation marks with her fingers, 'don't even know that.'

Stanley stood up and walked four paces to the kitchen—a corner with a hotplate and a couple of chipboard shelves.

'Tea?' he said as he flicked the switch on the kettle.

Jessica nodded.

He didn't understand the way Australians drank tea—the nurses in the hospital seemed to have made a religion of it, retreating every three hours to a dedicated 'tearoom' to cradle *World's Best Mum* mugs to their breasts. For Stanley, drinking tea was something done from porcelain cups, in restaurants, with family and friends.

'Do you miss it?' Jessica asked, pointing to a framed photo of him with his mother in the Tiger Balm gardens.

It was the wrong question. She should have asked: *What do you miss about it?* And then he would have answered: *The lights and the noise and the crowds and the chaos.* As it was, he only mumbled, 'Not really.'

'Beer?' Neville offers, pointing a crooked finger at Stanley.

Stanley nods. He has yet to develop a taste for beer—preferring spirits on the rare occasions that he does drink—but he doesn't want to appear rude.

'Would you like a glass?' Jessica's mother asks, pulling a tumbler from the dishwasher. Stanley looks around the table. Everybody is drinking beer, but not one of them is drinking from a glass.

'No thank you.'

Jessica's mother places a large ceramic dish in the middle of the table. Jessica's brother, who has not uttered a word since Stanley arrived, whispers, 'I hope you like tuna.'

'The British have a saying,' Stanley says, loudly, so everybody can hear, 'Chinese people eat everything with four legs...except the table.'

They all laugh, apart from the teenager, who points out that tuna fish don't have legs.

'Is that where you're from?' Mrs Cook asks, spooning a clump of macaroni and bechamel sauce onto Stanley's plate. 'China?'

'Hong Kong.'

Neville jumps in, his mouth bursting with pasta. 'Island or peninsula?'

Stanley wonders if he has underestimated Mr Cook. 'You know Hong Kong?'

'Pam and I paid a visit once,' Neville replies, clearly pleased with Stanley's reaction. 'Before we had kids.'

Pam wipes her hands on her apron. 'I bought a fake Rolex watch that still keeps perfect time.'

Stanley feels irrationally proud, as if he had assembled the cheap knock-off himself.

'They love all that stuff, don't they?' Neville goes on. 'Watches and cars and handbags.'

Stanley thinks of his cousin, Mei, who worked her summer holidays to buy a Chanel clutch.

'Stanley doesn't care about those things,' Jessica declares. 'Do you, Stanley.'

The entire family turns to look at him. Even Jessica's brother peeks through a gap in his fringe.

'Not really.'

'Another one, please, Pummy,' Neville says and bangs the butt of his beer bottle on the table. He turns to Stanley. 'They all want their kids to be doctors. The hotel doormen. The waiters. The taxi drivers. Everyone.'

Jessica locks eyes with Stanley, mouths an apology.

'I never pushed my kids into anything,' Neville says. 'I was hoping that one of them would want to take over the

farm one day. But none of them did.' Pam replaces Neville's empty bottle with a fresh one. 'And look, that's okay. That's their choice in the end. And things change. I mean, who knows who Jess'll marry.' He takes a swig of his beer. 'If I'm lucky, he'll be an agriculture student with an interest in dairy farming. Stranger things have happened. And Rhys, well, when he grows up and realises art doesn't pay shit until you're dead—'

'Neville.' Pam shoots her husband a look. She turns to Stanley. 'Rhys did that beautiful landscape on the wall over there.'

A picture of the family home. The paint is laid on thick. Stanley knows nothing about art, but he likes the painting. He says so.

'You'll have to excuse my husband,' Pam says as she clears the plates. 'He's been in a foul mood ever since the Swans lost the grand final. Four months ago.'

'Dad's family were big South Melbourne fans,' Jess explains.

'And who do you barrack for, Stanley?' Pam asks.

Jessica beams. 'Stan's a North Melbourne man.'

Stanley freezes. He has never watched a game of football. He and his ex-housemate had only chosen the Kangaroos—for situations like this—back when they shared a townhouse in North Melbourne. *Doesn't matter which one you say*, his friend had said at the time, *as long as it's not Collingwood*.

But Neville isn't interested. Minutes pass. Stanley listens to the clink of forks on ceramic plates, the whirr of the fan in the oven. Jessica nudges his foot beneath the table. Pam stands up and walks to the stove. Finally Neville licks the last drop of beer from the mouth of his bottle.

'Hit me again, Pam.'

'How about dessert? I made Jess's favourite. Apple pie.' They all watch Pam pull the pastry from the oven. The smell of cooked apples and cinnamon fills the air.

Neville leans back in his chair. 'How about a drink with my slice of pie?'

Mrs Cook looks imploringly at Jess.

'How's the farm going, Dad?'

Neville keeps his flint-grey eyes firmly locked on his wife. 'Three dead from bloat last month.'

Stanley scrapes at his macaroni, which has hardened like industrial glue to his plate.

'Hello? Anyone home?' A timorous voice echoes down the hall.

'That'll be Linda.' Rhys says. 'Can I go?'

Mr Cook shifts his gaze to his son. 'Go on then.'

Rhys scrambles from the room.

'At least it's a girl,' Neville says when they hear Linda's car rumble down the hill.

After apple pie, Neville goes for a smoke. His large frame cuts an imposing silhouette against the battered flyscreen and purple sky.

'Jess, honey, why don't you take Stanley to his room?'

Pam says. 'Let him settle in.'

Stanley follows Jessica down a long, dimly lit corridor. They pass a toilet that smells of lavender, and then Rhys's room with its hanging yellow road sign, before Jess throws open the door to her old bedroom.

'Hope you don't mind,' she says.

Stanley doesn't mind—it is spacious and clean—but he is a little surprised. The Jessica he knows doesn't quite match the rose-coloured quilt and neat row of teddy bears propped against the pillow.

'Mum's a hoarder,' Jess explains. 'She keeps absolutely everything.'

Stanley kicks off his shoes and throws his backpack onto the mattress. A yellow bear in a waistcoat falls onto the floor at Jessica's feet.

'It's perfect,' Stanley says.

Jessica picks up the bear and straightens its vest before placing it on the dresser. 'There's a fresh towel on the chair.'

Stanley collapses onto the bed. Springs, arthritic from disuse, groan beneath his bottom. Jessica puts her hand on the brass doorknob. Without turning around, she says, 'I'm really sorry, Stanley. About Dad.'

She never calls him Stanley. He is, and always has been, Stan. Sometimes even *Stan the man*.

'That's okay,' he says, his thoughts turning, for some reason, to the citizenship test. He thinks how much better it would be if it included scenarios just like this one.

When faced with an awkward situation while visiting the parents of your Australian friend (who is not yet your girlfriend but who you hope, some day, might be), the most appropriate response would be:

- A) Apologise—because, after all, it is always your fault.
- B) Empathise—e.g., 'This must be really hard for you.'
- C) Stand up for yourself—e.g., 'I don't have to put up with this.'
- D) Brush it off—e.g., 'No worries, mate.'

After a moment of deep thought, Stanley opts for D.

The room smells of dust and mildew and naphthalene balls. Around eleven, Stanley hears whispers in the hall.

'So?'

Jess.

'He's *swear*.'

And Mrs Cook.

'Isn't he?'

'But—'

A groan of pipes. Rushing water.

'But what?'

Buzz of an electric toothbrush. Spitting. Squeak of a rusty tap.

'He's no Eddie.'

A patter of slipped feet. Click of a light switch. The thump of doors being pulled firmly closed.

Stanley had tried to talk to his mother about Jess, once. It was a Sunday night and she'd called him at the usual time of eight o'clock—in the half-hour window between dinner and the start of her favourite soap opera.

'Have you eaten yet?' she said. A standard Cantonese greeting.

'Yes.' He could hear the tinny sound of the TV, ads for watches and anti-dandruff shampoo. 'Where's Dad?'

'Out.' His mother's euphemism for gambling. She would wait up for him tonight, on the couch, as she munched on dried watermelon seeds.

'Ma.'

'What? Is something the matter?'

Stanley imagined coming straight out and saying it, like some American son in the movies. *I've met someone*. He pictured the fallout. *Is she Chinese? What does her father do?*

'Nothing's wrong. I have a new study partner, that's all.'

'Study partner,' his mother scoffed, before blowing her

nose into the phone. 'That's the problem with Australians. They think everybody's equal. You can't study in groups. Everybody's at different levels.'

Stanley scratched big circles onto an old gas bill with a biro. 'You're right.'

'And you should call your grandma.'

'Why? Is everything okay?'

'You need to apologise.'

'For what?'

'For never calling.'

Sleep evades him. Five years ago, when Stanley had first arrived in Australia, he'd downloaded albums of traffic noise from the iTunes store. Now, in the impenetrable blackness of the bush, he finds his earphones and plugs himself in. As he listens, he pictures himself back on the balcony of his parents' Mong Kok apartment, perched on a plastic stool between a sagging clothesline and a dripping air conditioning unit. He imagines himself looking up at a sky that is not flat and blue and interminable, but choked with smog and cut into neat slices by the blades of the buildings.

At three am Jessica sneaks into his room.

'I can't sleep,' she says before sliding into the bed. She slips her fingers inside his T-shirt. Stanley feels her hot breath on the back of his neck.

'Me neither.' He doesn't turn around to face her. He doesn't want her to know about his body's dramatic, involuntary response to her presence in his bed. Instead they lie, curled together, facing the wall.

'I never knew you were a teddy bear kind of girl.'

'Shut up.' Jess play-punches him on the shoulder.

'I hope this bed has seen more teddy bears than boys.'

Jess laughs. 'Dad made sure of that.'

'Your dad's scary. He should get a job at Guantanamo Bay.' Jessica says nothing, but Stanley feels her body stiffen beside him. 'I'm joking.' Talk of Neville is enough to make Stanley lose his erection. He rolls to face his friend and runs his fingertips across her lips in the dark. 'I like this.'

Jessica buries her face in Stanley's shoulder. Her hair smells of sweat and shampoo and apple pie. Stanley wonders if she can hear his heart doing somersaults behind his sternum. If she can, she says nothing. Within minutes he hears heavy breathing, quickly followed by a soft snore.

When Stanley opens his eyes the next morning, Jess is gone. For a moment he wonders if he imagined the whole thing, but then he discovers one of Jessica's earrings buried beneath the doona. He stuffs the earring inside his backpack. Even though nothing happened, he doesn't want Neville finding any evidence of Jessica sharing his bed.

Stanley peers through a gap in the curtain. The entire



Cook family is outside his window, cleaning the barbecue and filling an esky with beer. He takes advantage of the momentary privacy inside the house to brush his teeth, shower and dress. There is no lock on the bathroom door, only a sign with a picture of roses, which says *Patience is a virtue*.

Once clean, he goes outside to look for Jess. He finds her with her father, beside the barbecue, counting sausages.

'How many people are coming again?' Stanley hears Jessica ask.

'Around twenty, give or take.'

Stanley's heart sinks. Jessica had given him the impression it would just be a family thing.

'Morning, sleepyhead!' Jessica calls when she sees him.

Stanley feels his cheeks burn.

'Must be all that beer from last night!' Neville jeers.

'Be nice, Daddy,' Jess says and waves a pair of heavy tongs at her father.

'Your dad's right,' Stanley says. 'Chinese people lack a specific enzyme for metabolising alcohol.'

'Exactly.' Jessica places a sympathetic hand on Stanley's shoulder and looks at her father. 'He can't help it.'

What's left of the morning is spent preparing for lunch. Pam makes an enormous batch of potato salad. Neville appraises the piles of meat. Jessica marinates the chicken

wings. Stanley hovers, arranging sauce bottles in a straight line on the table. At midday, the first guest arrives—a short, barrel-chested man with grey sideburns and laughing eyes. Jessica introduces Stanley as her good friend from uni. The man shakes Stanley's hand. When he finds out Stanley is a medical student, he launches into a detailed account of his wife's battle with pancreatic cancer—a story, he says, that Jessica has heard a thousand times.

Minutes later, a ure and two four-wheel drives storm up the driveway. Family friends pour out of the vehicles, carrying desserts and six-packs of beer. Jessica, away for so long in the city, is the unofficial guest of honour. She rolls her eyes when nobody is looking to show Stanley she hasn't forgotten him, which makes him almost content to sit on a plastic chair next to the speakers with Rhys. After twenty minutes, Rhys leans into the esky beside him and pulls out a cold beer. He passes it to Stanley.

'Thanks,' Stanley says, not daring to rebuff what he imagines is a rare gesture of kindness. For another twenty minutes they sit in silence, watching the group and taking swigs from their bottles.

'I hate Australia Day,' Rhys says, finally, before cracking open another Carlton Draught.

Aside from the citizenship ceremony, today is the first time Stanley has celebrated it. He nods.

'Bunch of nostalgic bullshit,' Rhys says. Then, sensing he

might have offended Stanley, he adds. 'Thanks for saying you liked my painting.'

Stanley can feel the alcohol in his cheeks, his hands, his feet. He resists the urge to scratch. 'No worries.'

He is saved from any further awkward questions by the late arrival of another guest. Stanley recognises the Toyota Tarago straight away. When Eddie Mitchell emerges from the van, the throng immediately makes way for him. As Eddie walks up, Neville yells his name and gives him a loud slap across the shoulder. Jessica is no longer the centre of attention. Everybody is watching Eddie. Everybody except Rhys, who is watching Stanley.

'Happy Australia Day,' Rhys says and raises his beer.

The rest of the afternoon is a blur. When Linda arrives, Rhys disappears with her inside the house, leaving Stanley alone on a camp chair under a tree. He drinks two more beers in quick succession until his head is swimming. Only Mrs Cook seems concerned about his welfare, stopping every half-hour to talk and to offer him a plate of food. Chicken wings and potato salad. A sausage with sauce on white bread. Pineapple cooked on the barbecue with a large mound of vanilla ice-cream.

As Stanley eats, he watches Eddie. Jessica's ex-boyfriend has not dressed up for the occasion: he is wearing a T-shirt with a hole in the shoulder and faded board shorts. Everybody wants a piece of him. As soon as he finishes talking to one

person, another partygoer sidles in. Stanley wonders who invited him. He suspects Neville, but really it could be any of them. Even Jessica. It's clear that she's still in love with Eddie from the way she drifts around him—pretending to ignore him but laughing loudly and never quite letting him out of her sight. It is only once Eddie disappears to the toilet, late in the afternoon, that she goes in search of Stanley.

'I'm sorry,' she says when she finally finds him. But she doesn't clarify what she is sorry for. It could be anything: her invasion of his bed last night, inviting Eddie, the way she's ignored him the entire day.

All the silent watching has made Stanley angry. 'Did you know he was coming?'

'Of course not,' Jess says, but she won't make eye contact with him. 'We were together for two years—I guess he became part of the family.'

'And they still accept him, after what he did?'

'I told them when we broke up it was a mutual thing.'

Stanley thinks back to that day in the anatomical pathology lab. How desperately he had wanted to make Jessica smile, how delighted he was when she did.

'He's broken up with Stephanie.'

Stanley's head pounds. 'How convenient for you.'

'What's that supposed to mean?'

Stanley feels two hands pressing down on his shoulders like sandbags. It's Eddie.

'Lover's tiff?' Eddie jokes. He lets go of Stanley and sits down on Rhys's empty camp chair.

'Shut up,' Jessica says, with the same tone of feigned annoyance she used with Stanley the night before.

Stanley examines Eddie, takes in his eager-to-please eyes, his dopey smile. For once Stanley feels a kinship with the guy. Then he looks at Jessica, the girl responsible for bringing them here, to the middle of nowhere. There is a cluster of pimples on her forehead and the first blush of sunburn across her nose. When she leans into the esky, Stanley catches a glimpse of the tattoo on her lower back—the Chinese character for double happiness, written crudely, as if by a child.

When they head back to Melbourne the next day, Stanley insists on driving. It feels good to grip the wheel with both hands and steer the car down the gravel driveway. Stanley's headache is gone, but the sunlight is intolerable. Jessica lends him her sunglasses. At the halfway point, they stop to fill up the car with petrol and grab a Big Mac meal from McDonald's. Jess feeds Stanley French fries as they speed down the freeway towards the city. They don't speak. They only stare through the windshield at the straight black road and the clear blue sky and the occasional bright yellow hazard signs.