

**School of Media, Creative Arts and Social Inquiry**

**Trace**

**&**

**Margin/Periphery/Threshold:**

**Contemporary Short Fiction and the Migrant Experience**

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**This thesis is presented for the Degree of**

**Doctor of Philosophy**

**of**

**Curtin University**

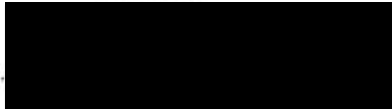
**March 2021**



**Declaration**

To the best of my knowledge and belief this thesis contains no material previously published by any other person except where due acknowledgment has been made.

This thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university.

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## **Acknowledgement of Country**

This PhD was researched and written on Noongaar, Yawaru and Miriwoong countries. I acknowledge the Indigenous custodians of these lands as Australia's first storytellers and acknowledge their elders past, present and emerging.

## Acknowledgements

I wish to thank my supervisors Dr Deborah Hunn and Dr Marilyn Metta for their knowledge, generous guidance and unwavering belief in my research. They've cheered my successes on good days and bolstered my morale on bad days, all the while providing me with insightful comments and suggestions. I would also like to thank Dr Lucy Dougan who joined my supervisory team for a brief and wonderful time. Thank you for being such a critical and wise first reader. Thank you to my colleagues at the Curtin Humanities PhD Hub 2015-2019 where I enjoyed myriad cups of tea and many lively conversations.

Beyond Curtin, I owe a debt of gratitude to the Varuna Writers Centre for selecting me to participate in the Short Prose Intensive 2015. Through that program I gained valuable mentoring in short story from Tegan Bennett- Daylight, a quiet place to write and new writing friendships. I am similarly grateful to The Fellowship of Australian Writers (FAWWA) who granted me an emerging writer residency in 2014. Journals I kept while writing at FAWWA's Mattie Furphy House later inspired 'Unfolding'. I would also like to thank the organisers of the Joe O'Sullivan Writers Prize, the Julie Lewis Biennial Literary Award, the City of Armadale Writers' Prize and The Big Issue Fiction edition competition for their encouragement. Thank you too to the editors of *Westerly* and *Pause* for finding a home for two of these stories and to *Coolabah* for picking up an article about the creation of 'Trace'.

Heartfelt thanks to the staff of the Battye Library, the State Library of Western Australia, the State Records Office of WA, and the Inglewood and Dianella libraries without whose knowledge and assistance I could not have written this PhD.

My gratitude too to the Graduate Women of Western Australia for assisting me with the cost of travel to the North West via the Jillian Bradshaw Scholarship in the Humanities 2018. It was an absolute privilege to travel to Yawaru and Miriwoong country.

In Broome I would like to acknowledge the assistance of the Broome Historical Society Museum staff and volunteers, especially Dr Elaine Rabbitt. I would also like to thank Will Thomas at Radio Goolarri and Bart Pigram at Narlijia Cultural Tours for their encouragement and local knowledge. 'Saltwater' and 'Rubibi' would not have developed in the same way without you. Thank you too to staff at Goolarri media for patiently fielding my enquiries about the video footage from 'A Taste of Broome' 2018. I would also like to thank Alison Morris at the Broome Public Library who assisted me to navigate Broome Shire's oral history collection. Thank you to everyone who agreed to

be interviewed for that project. Thank you too to Jo Bell for alerting me to the existence of the Sisters of St John of God Centre and for insisting I see the sights at sunset.

In Kununurra I am grateful to the staff and volunteers at the Miriwoong Language Centre who insisted I go down the road to meet the artists and staff at Waringarri Arts. If not for them I would not have heard Ted Carlton's story which profoundly affected the development of 'Candlebrot'. Thank you Ted for your patience, your willingness to chat and for the mug of tea. I would also like to thank Andy Marriott at the Kununurra Visitor Centre for showing me the old Durack homestead and recommending a good swimming hole. Thank you too to all those associated with the Wyndham Museum.

So many friends have supported me along the way that I cannot mention everyone, but I must name a few: Ashleigh Angus, Jennifer Bennett, Stephanie Creed, Christine Evans, Helen Jones Fairnie, Iris Finn, Mandy Kretzmer, Catherine Lang, Sue and Julian Levy, Judy Katzenellenbogen, Leonie Mansbridge, Sharon Matthews, Carol Mills, Marie O'Rourke, Rosene Shapiro, Emily Sun, and Tanya Thomson. Thank you for your friendship and support.

Finally, I would like to thank my family: My parents, Aubrey and Janice Stevenson who brought me up to love books and history; my sisters Margaret Cantwell and Ann Oliver who kindly loaned me a space in which to write uninterrupted over two New Zealand summers; and my children, Elisheva, Yona and Sivan who have been endlessly patient as I carved out time for this PhD. Thank you for your support, your forbearance and your love.

This PhD was made possible by an Australian Government Research Training Program Scholarship and a Curtin University Post Graduate Scholarship. Thank you.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are respectfully advised that deceased people are referenced in this PhD.

## ABSTRACT

This PhD, conducted on the principles of practise-led research (Dean & Smith, 2009), addresses the question: How might a migrant writer employ the short story to explore the complexity of migrant experience in Australia?

Inspired by Pacht's research on the North American short story cycle (2009), *Trace*, the creative component of the PhD, is a collection of short fiction which explores selected moments in the immigration history of Western Australia. The seventeen interlinked stories represent diverse migrant voices—Irish, Māori, Chinese-Malaysian, Cornish, Hazara, Jewish, Scottish, Dutch and Pakeha—within a loose structure informed by notions of autofiction and historiographic metafiction. The complementary exegesis investigates selected short story collections published by migrant writers in Australia since 1945: Mena Abdullah and Ray Mathew's *The Time of the Peacock* (1965); Elizabeth Jolley's *Five Acre Virgin* (1976) and *The Travelling Entertainer* (1979); and Nam Le's *The Boat* (2008).

From the 1970s until the late twentieth century, critics and scholars have read Australian migrant writing through a multicultural lens characterised by an assumed Anglo-Celtic/Migrant binary. This PhD aims to read and write migrant fiction beyond the binary by unsettling the categories Anglo-Celtic and Migrant, as they have been constructed within the field of Australian literary criticism. Both the reading and writing of text are here undertaken with reference to my own term, under-storey, a non-hierarchical metaphor for describing the plurality of story. The concept is derived from a southern hemisphere sense of place and allows for a wider (and wilder) array of metaphors for describing stories and story making practice (Metta, 2017). The concept of under-storey owes much to postmodern approaches to history and literary studies, in particular to Deleuze and Guattari (1987).

Within the metaphorical context provided by under-storey, theories of hybridity (Bhaba, 1994; Mishra, 1999; Goldberg, 2000; Hall, 2000; Ang, 2001; Ali, 2007; Metta, 2017), historiographic metafiction (White, 1973; Hutcheon 1988) and autofiction (E. Jones, 2009; Mortimer, 2009; Ferreira-Meyers, 2019) inform both the creative and exegetical components of this PhD.

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## TRACE

This is what language is:  
a habitable grief. A turn of speech  
for the everyday and ordinary abrasion  
of losses such as this:

which hurts  
just enough to be a scar

and heals just enough to be a nation.

- Eavan Boland<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Boland, E. (1998). *The Lost Land*.

Trace

On a late summer's day in 1899, Bridie Macken sat up straight and still in a darkened photography studio, looked unsmilingly at the camera, and was rewarded, eventually, with a black and white photograph that showed her to advantage. This image of her in a new dress with fashionable leg of mutton sleeves, her hair piled high on her head, her chin tilted slightly, was to be a present for her mother.

Bridie slipped the photograph into an envelope and wrote an accompanying letter in which she spoke of her place of employment, her wages and pastimes, and the black grace of West Australian swans, which are perpetually a surprise to her. She did not mention the business with Eva, thinking that it would only bring darkness to her mother's eyes. Instead, what her mother will see from the photograph is that she, Bridie, has arrived already into a better future.

\*\*\*

### **Adelaide Terrace, Perth**

**8 February, 1899**

'Are you Miss Bridget Macken?'

'Yes Constable. I am.'

'And did you arrive here on the S.S. Wyndham, January 19, of this year?'

'I did Constable.'

Bridie took her eyes off PC Bremworth for a moment to look across at her employer who was standing behind and to one side of him. Bridie had not served in the house long enough to be able to read Mrs Marshall's gaze yet looked to her now, in the absence of a closer ally, for some sign, some hint of reassurance. Mrs Marshall's tall frame was unbending, and her lips pressed together as they were reminded Bridie of a reluctant cockle which, having been plucked summarily from its tidal home, had no intention of ever re-opening its mouth.

'Are you listening now Bridget?'

The soft, grave tone of PC Bremworth's voice reminded Bridie of the parish priest back home and caused her to look back at him. She nodded, 'Yes Constable.'

'I need you to tell me the truth now, for it concerns one of you girls.'

There had been sixty girls on the voyage out with Bridie, most of them English, all of them single and all of them bound to pay for their free outward passage with a year of domestic service in the Swan River Colony. At the policeman's words, Bridie's thoughts turned quickly to the other seven girls of The Irish Watch, the girls she had eaten and slept and larked about with on the shipboard journey: Eva, Kate, Hannah, Mary, Kitty, Maggie and Ellen. For forty-three days they had been like sisters to each other, and Bridie often felt that they were lost to her now that they had all been scattered. She, Kate, Hannah, Maggie, Ellen and Eva had each gone to general service in Perth and Claremont houses, so they might at least be afforded the opportunity to meet one another at Friendly Society gatherings. But Kitty and Mary had gone to work at a dairy in Guildford and Bridie felt that in all probability she would never see them again.

She was not surprised that PC Bremworth asked her about the girls, for she had been the leader of their Watch on board ship, but whatever could she tell him of them now, nearly a month after they had all been parted? Fixing her grey eyes to the policeman's own, Bridie replied, 'I will tell you what I know Constable.'

'Was Eva Collins known to you on board?'

'Yes sir.'

'And are you aware that Eva died yesterday in hospital?'

'That cannot be the same girl sir. Eva Collins has gone to Claremont. I visited her at The Depot on the Sunday before she was to leave. And that was only a fortnight ago.'

Bremworth regretted now that he had spoken to Bridget so bluntly, regretted too that he was not able to find a way of making his next move less upsetting. In his awkwardness he moved his hand too quickly to the dark pocket of his policeman's coat.

'Is this yours?' he asked.

Bridie saw at once that he was returning to her a note she had given Eva. The greater part of the paper was taken up with a drawing of them all disembarking from the S.S. Wyndham. Each girl sported a label stating her known whereabouts, as though she were a parcel: Bridie was labelled: 'GS Adelaide Terrace.' Eva's label read: 'GS Claremont.' Miss Monk, the Matron, who had been as a mother to them on board ship, was depicted hovering among them like an angel. Bridie wished Miss Monk was with her now, in one of her practical plaid dresses, calm, commanding and well prepared to answer PC Bremworth's questions. But as far as she knew, Miss Monk had returned already to London to chaperone another group of immigrant girls.

Keeping her voice steady Bridie owned that the paper belonged to her and asked if she might have it.

'That you can lass. I'm sorry for your loss.'

## **The Immigrant Depot**

**Corner Murray and Goderich Streets, Perth**

**24 January, 1899**

It was Eva's job, now that she was the only young girl left, to tend The Depot's hand lamps—to keep the brass burnished and shining, to clean the glass chimneys, to pour kerosene carefully into each lamp's chamber. She went slowly about her work this morning, bringing the lamps out carefully, two at a time, lining them up along the side of the out-house storeroom.

Another ship load of girls would arrive soon, most of them English. These she knew were less likely to be kind. She was glad to be leaving for Claremont in the afternoon.

Yesterday Bridie had come to visit, bringing her a letter and a new pinafore to wear over her clothes. How tatty her own pinafore had seemed as she took it off; the waist pulled in with a piece of string, the fabric worn so thin that when it was washed and hung on the line to dry pinpricks of light shone through it. Walking across the yard this morning in her new clothes Eva thought she might pull her hair up a little higher on her head for this afternoon.

## **Adelaide Terrace, Perth**

**9 February, 1899**

'Did you spend much time with her there, at The Depot?'

'No. The Matron frowned upon my coming.'

'Why was that?'

'She worried I suppose what my employer might think if I was seen to be keeping company with the kind of girls that live there.'

'And?'

'I asked her who would visit Eva if I did not. She said, 'No one.'

'So you went back on the Sunday?'

Mrs Marshall said nothing, but Bridie guessed that, if the hair on her head had not been pinned firmly in place with a sandal wood comb, it might have stood on end.

'Yes Constable. I did.'

'And you felt her to be quite cheerful?'

'Yes.'

'How did you think she would go in her new job?'

'Well enough.'

'What do you mean by that?'

‘Some people said Eva was slow and insisted that I help her all the time. “You better keep an eye on her,” that sort of thing.’

‘That can’t have helped her get a job.’

‘Most employers want a quick girl.’

‘So that’s how she came to stay on at The Depot?’

‘Yes. She was the last of us to leave.’

‘How did she seem when you saw her?’

Cheering inside, Bridie thought to herself, but she said only, ‘glad to be going to a job at last.’

## **Shenton Road, Claremont**

**January 24, 1899**

Eva and Mrs Price descended from the railway platform on the Shenton Roadside opposite Butler’s Swamp, which exuded, at all hours, a stench of mud, ooze and rotting vegetation. Encountering it for the first time, Eva put one hand up to her face and faltered under the weight of her trunk, even though it held little. Mrs Price announced in a bracing voice, and with an accent Eva was coming to associate with the colony: ‘The smell gets bad but it’s nothing to the insects.’

Alighting as they had, the women stood with their backs to the iridescent glory of Freshwater Bay—its jetties and picnic areas and the splendour of the Osborne Hotel. That she had alighted in a pretty water-side village and that the Friendly Society rooms were but two blocks away from her new address was something Eva was quite unable to realise.

In Shenton Road a scant half dozen houses had been built. The Price house was farthest from the corner, and the handsome limestone block and terracotta railway station which had itself only recently been completed. On the South side of the property there was no neighbouring home, only the bare dirt road, the bright sky and the flat summer green and brown of the swamp across the way.

As they stepped into the shade of the narrow hall, Eva felt anxiety once again enclose her, as if a dark swarm of insects had already come inside. When Mrs Price closed the door behind them, Eva realized she would be the sole servant in the house.

## Adelaide Terrace, Perth

9 February, 1899

‘Am I correct in thinking that you met Eva in Ireland, that you travelled to London together and boarded the S S Wyndham together?’

‘Yes, Constable. From Dublin.’

‘What did you think of Eva when you first met her?’

‘I thought she seemed quiet, Constable, and perhaps a little sad, as we all were upon leaving.’

‘And you stayed at Houseferry Road in London overnight?’

‘Yes Constable. All the Irish girls come together there before departing. We arrived on the Sunday afternoon and boarded the ship on the Monday morning at nine o’clock.’

‘How did you find your stay?’

‘Very comfortable, Constable.’

PC Bremworth noticed Bridget hesitate and felt in himself an uncommon desire to put her at ease that was, he realised with surprise, not entirely professional. ‘Go on Bridget.’

Bridie’s eyes slipped across to Mrs Marshall’s face, ‘We should have liked to go to church in the evening, Constable.’

‘And why could you not?’

‘Once we arrived at the house we were not allowed out after seven without a chaperone...Not all the girls were church goers...Others wanted to go to a different church than ourselves...’ Bridie’s voice trailed off. ‘I suppose it was too difficult to arrange.’

‘So you wanted to go to Church that night to pray for strength on the journey, and for a safe passage, but you were unable to do so.’

‘Yes. It seemed important that night to go.’

‘How did you feel then?’

‘Miserable.’

‘And Eva?’

‘The same as the rest of us, though she said she had no one left behind to miss her.’

‘Did anything happen on the SS Wyndham that made you think Eva was anything other than “a bit slow”?’

‘It was very discombobulating to be at sea. And we were so sick. I try not to think back on it to be honest.’

‘But there was never anything about Eva that made you think she was more melancholy than the rest of you?’

Bridie did not reply to Constable Bremworth's question immediately, recalling how, a few days into the journey, when the girls were feeling better, Miss Monk and the Captain had arranged for them to take a gentle dinner of beef tea, bread and biscuits on the poop deck. When the time came to gather for the meal, Eva had remained below so that Bridie was forced to go and look for her.

Eva had not stirred as Bridie approached but had remained bent over one of the long tables customarily used for meals. The room had smelt unpleasantly of seasickness.

'It's very nice outside Eva.'

Eva made no sign that she had heard her and continued to look down at her hands which were, Bridie had then seen, engaged with some activity that caused the tip of Eva's tongue to peek out the corner of her mouth. With her red hair and gentle features, Eva reminded Bridie of a match, a flame, though she had none of a flame's quick brilliance.

'Eva. Miss Monk is asking for you upstairs.'

Her lack of response had not surprised Bridie a second time, but she'd felt a growing urgency for them both. She had known by then, that if they did not move quickly to re-join the girlish crowd on the poop deck, Miss Monk would have cause to note in her shipboard journal that not all the girls were obedient. A copper plate remark such as this against your name would make it doubly hard to get work in the colony upon arrival. Moving closer, she had seen that Eva held a small white object and a butter knife. Her voice, when it came, had sounded limp, as though all the air had been kicked out of it.

'We will never go back, will we?' Eva had said, still looking down at her hands which were busy, below the table.

It had been a statement although Eva had sounded it with a lilt, like a question. Bridie stood quietly.

'What did I do that they should send me away?'

The depth of appeal in Eva's words had shaken Bridie who had not thought too much about Eva's past. Instinctively she had sought to reassure her.

'Nothing,' she had said, watching Eva, whose cheeks were flushed. 'I'm sure nothing.'

At Bridie's words, the limp and crooked line of Eva's mouth had set firm.

'Will you come upstairs with me?'

Eva slipped one hand, together with its contents, into the pocket of her pinafore, gathered up her mug and spoon with the other and moved towards the door. Sticking together, they'd made their way wordlessly along the narrow passage, and up from between the decks into the light.

'No,' said Bridie out loud to the policeman. 'No, Eva was as she was.'



PC Bremworth seemed not to find this enough of an answer and Bridie looked with some appeal to Mrs Marshall, who fixed her eyes on Bridie's face for a moment before turning to the policeman herself.

'Bridget and I have things to do Constable Bremworth. Would you be so kind as to leave us for this morning.'

## **The Immigrant Depot and Women's Home**

### **Corner Murray and Goderich Streets**

**20 and 21 January, 1899.**

As they approached it from the road, the girls saw that The Immigrant Depot or Women's Home was a long two storey brick building with outward opening windows, only the top level of which could be seen above a high wooden fence. Conducted through the main entrance, the girls were shown into a dusty yard where a pile of wooden planks rested at one end, and a row of WCs lined the other. Here the Matron, Mrs Cullen, greeted Miss Monk warmly, while the existing residents stood in an untidy group, wearing what looked like a general servant's uniform; long dark sleeves under pinafores that shone with such brilliance in the hot January light that the newcomers found themselves blinking under the curious gaze of their owners. Eva was reminded of the orphanage she had come from. And Bridie was not surprised to later discover that Mrs Cullen was a widow with four children, and that The Immigrant Depot and Women's Home was also the colony's Poor House.

Following Miss Monk's departure, the girls were shown into a long room divided into sections by means of simple wooden partitions. Each compartment was sufficiently large to accommodate three girls. Wooden slat beds, devoid of bedclothes, stood ready on a bare floor. Despite the windows all standing open, the atmosphere was hot and airless.

Looking around at the stable-like accommodation, Bridie thought that calling this place a 'home' was a bit of a stretch considering it was barren of soft furnishing, or any other decorative element that might render it inviting. Clearly the Colonial Secretary does not mean for us to become comfortable here, she thought.

'Come girls. If we take these stalls side by side and top 'n tail the beds we can all stay together for one more night.'

As soon as the words were out of her mouth, Bridie wished with all her heart to call them back, for in the faces of her companions she saw the same anxiety that lay unspoken in herself. Bridie knew that no one could, at this moment, tell them what would become of them in the

morning, or how they would be getting on in the colony a week from now, let alone what the long wide future held in store for them. Quickly she encouraged them to arrange their things.

When it came time to say good-bye, Bridie hugged Eva hard and whispered that she would visit. Eva, who had heard the rules read out to them on arrival the night before and knew that no such visits were allowed, was not so slow as all that. ‘What do you mean?’ she asked. ‘They won’t let you.’

‘We’ll see,’ said Bridie. ‘Look for me on Sunday.’

Bridie moved down the dark hall towards the waiting carriage then. Touching Bridie’s hand at the door, Eva pushed a smooth white object into her friend’s palm.

‘For you,’ she said. And before Bridie could thank her, Eva turned back into the house and stood part way down the hall while the last of the Irish girls said their goodbyes. Eva knew that she must let Bridie go, but she could not. No sooner had the gate banged shut than Eva dashed outside and up the path to open it. Outside in the street, Eva caught a last glimpse of Bridie, her head held up straight, her back poker-stiff, her figure impossibly small. ‘Good bye,’ Eva shouted, trying to reach her friend with the sound of her voice. ‘Goodbye!’

But the carriage had turned the corner. Bridie was gone.

Eva returned to her room alone, tidied her bed and made her way to the kitchen where she stood under the door jamb waiting for the right moment to announce herself. She felt strangely out of place without the other girls from the Irish Watch. Bits of her seemed to have fallen off; her friends, her life, her known world were scattered. Eva felt as though she were being spun round and round in an uneasy game of Blindman’s Buff that no one had asked her if she wanted to play. She put her hand to her face. Beads of perspiration had collected on her forehead. She felt sick. And now the two English girls in the kitchen were looking at her. ‘Sweet Jesus,’ she prayed, ‘Sweet Jesus, strengthen this thy servant...’ but Eva collapsed and was removed by Nurse Emmerson to the Perth Hospital where she stayed for two days, receiving treatment for melancholia.

## **Adelaide Terrace**

**9 February, 1899**

When she slid into bed and could let it fall, Bridie dropped her head onto the pillow as though it were a brick. Her room was hot, the air seemed to press in close, and the day’s events had filled her with questions rather than answers.

Turning to lie on her back Bridie looked up through the gloom at the ceiling and listened to the sounds of the street outside; a horse and carriage passing, a night bird on the river, no wind. She

couldn't imagine what PC Bremworth had carried away in his notebook from their conversation. And when she thought of Eva her heart ached. How she wished she'd been able to offer her more than a thin friendship. She wondered too what her family at home were doing now, and she tried to calm herself by imagining that she was lying in her old bed with her sisters, one on either side.

Somewhere in the hot darkness a mosquito buzzed. The sound set her teeth on edge and she clamped her jaw tight until it ached. When she let it go her tears slid backwards down the sides of her face to dampen the linen beneath her head with salt.

## **Shenton Road, Claremont**

**28 January, 1899**

Eva was relieved to discover that Mr and Mrs Price had three young children for her to look after and there was another, an older boy named John.

From her first morning in the house, she committed to establishing a routine and Mrs Price, who was expecting another baby, did not, at first, criticise her efforts. Eva rose in the morning and lit the stove so that there was hot water by the time Mr and Mrs Price appeared. Next she shepherded the energetic frenzy of children through breakfast, into clothes and out the door to the one-room school. After they were gone, she turned her attention to cleaning the house and preparing a meal for Mrs Price to eat at noon.

By Friday she had the housework done and fresh loaves of bread ready for the weekend; she was able to turn her attention to the laundry, a chore with which Mrs Price had fallen woefully behind. Just as Eva was preparing to fold and press a basket of clean linens, John Price surprised her in the doorway, casting his shadow across the blanket she had laid over the table for the ironing. John, eighteen years old and a head taller than his father, had a job further down the line towards Fremantle. He was accustomed to leave even before Eva was awake, and usually returned home only slightly before the younger children. His early arrival made Eva uneasy. She moved quickly toward the stove to test the irons, flicking them with a drop of water from the saucer she had set by.

'Aren't you going to wish me good day?' John asked.

Neither of the irons was hot enough yet to please Eva, so she moved to shake out one of Mr Price's shirts and greeted John without looking up. She hoped that he would take it as a hint, understand that she wanted him to move off.

'You're a quiet little thing aren't ya?'

Eva moved a little further away from him to wait beside the corner cupboard. He moved swiftly then and held his hand over her mouth so that she was forced to taste the sweat and wood sap still on him. Instinctively she bit down hard on his thumb.

‘No one will come at this time of day, even if you scream,’ he said and shoved her roughly across the table. Eva had her head turned to the side and saw the heavy irons still warming on the stove. Wrenching an arm free and twisting her torso she fell out of his reach so that her feet landed solidly on the floor.

‘Don’t you ever—’

‘What?’ John taunted.

Eva did not stop to answer but swung up a hot iron. Holding it in front of her with two hands she backed away and made a dash for the yard and the toilet shed where she locked herself in. The small space was hot and stunk worse even than the swamp across the street, but she had managed to throw the iron towards him and he did not come after her. Eva dropped her weight on to the latrine and gathered herself in.

After a time she heard the sound of John’s axe as he took logs from the pile and split them: one, two, three blows and a piece fell into sections.

Eva considered the lock on the toilet door, a narrow strip of wood dropped into a useless looking catch. She heard John’s axe again. Another block of wood was demolished. Eva’s head was pounding in the heat and she hoped she wasn’t going to faint again. The stench was so bad she could taste it...

‘Gonna piss on ya girlie,’ called John, and he peed long and hard against the back wall of her shelter before returning to the wood pile. Alternately praying and committing herself to silence, Eva waited. Finally, there came the sound of Mrs Price returning, ‘Dinner’s behind, the laundry’s unfinished and from what I can see you have not even swept the floor this afternoon.’

‘I’m sorry Mrs Price,’ Eva called.

‘What’s the matter girl?’

‘Nothing Mrs Price,’ Eva said, coming out onto the path.

‘John tells me you’ve been locked in that toilet for more than an hour.’

‘She’s a lazy slut,’ John said from behind her.

‘Did you lock yourself in the toilet this afternoon as my son suggests?’

‘I did Mrs Price.’

‘I can take you back to The Depot, if that’s what you want but no one will take you on if you’re returned.’

Eva looked at her boots and held tight to the fabric of her pinafore so that it went straight and taut at her sides.

‘What do you say Eva?’

‘Yes Mrs Price.’

‘Pack your bags. I’ll return you in the morning.’

Mrs Price shook her head as she moved away and Eva was left to follow her up the path.

John fell into step behind her.

## **Adelaide Terrace, Perth**

**13 February 1899.**

When Bridie came downstairs to the front room on Saturday afternoon she was surprised to see Mrs Marshall and PC Bremworth seated together there, and the table set for tea. As she entered Bremworth stood, and Mrs Marshall beckoned Bridie to take a seat at the table with them. Something in her face made Bridie’s chest feel tight, and she looked from one to the other. She did not think she would be able to drink a cup of tea but she took a mouthful, and then another while PC Bremworth smiled at them and thanked them for their support of his enquiries.

‘You are no doubt surprised Bridget that I have not discussed the details of Eva’s death with you. I apologize if this has caused you any concern or discomfort.’

‘I had assumed it was typhoid fever,’ said Bridie quietly.

‘It was not.’

‘Bridie,’ said Mrs Marshall, with a gentleness that the younger woman did not know she possessed, ‘PC Bremworth and I feel that it’s best for him to tell you what happened. I had hoped it would not be necessary but...’ she let her voice trail off so that PC Bremworth put his cup and saucer down and continued for her.

‘I’m afraid there has been an article written in the newspaper. Eva’s case will be much discussed.’

Bridie had thought nothing of the *Western Mail* folded meticulously to one side of PC Bremworth, but on hearing this she pushed her tea to one side, extended her hand for it and read:

*A suicide of a horrifying nature took place at the Women’s Depot, in Goderich Street, yesterday morning. A young woman named, Eva Collins<sup>2</sup>, one of the batch of immigrants who had arrived in the colony a few weeks ago, had been staying at the Depot while*

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<sup>2</sup> The italicized text is reproduced from the original newspaper article, ‘Shocking Suicide.’ (February 11, 1898) *Western Mail*, p. 47. Retrieved from <http://trove.nla.gov.au/news-article/33150317>

Only the girl’s name has been changed.

*awaiting engagement as a domestic servant. Yesterday morning at about seven o'clock, she dressed herself, and after saturating her clothes with kerosene, retired to an outhouse, and applied a match to them. In a moment she was a mass of flames, and before any assistance could be rendered she had been burned beyond recovery. She was immediately conveyed to the hospital, where she lingered in great agony until a few minutes after nine o'clock, when she died. No reason can be assigned to the rash action, but the woman is said to have been somewhat eccentric in her behaviour.*

\*\*\*

The black swan was sitting in the water so close to Bridie that she stepped carefully, so as to avoid throwing her shadow over it. Bridie watched it bend its head to drink. The crimson beak appeared and disappeared, first into the water, and then into the swan's charcoal feathers.

Bridie's thoughts have been running round and round the question of Eva, ever since PC Bremworth handed her the newspaper last Saturday. She breathed carefully, and promised herself she would go to Mass again later.

The swan rummaged vigorously, loosening a wisp of down that lifted off into the air, and then, quite suddenly, it turned and looked at her.

Bridie stepped back into the shade and opened her canvas holdall. Inside, beneath her purse and a letter to her mother, nestled a small white fish. It weighed perhaps a quarter of a pound and Bridie knew Eva would have had to severely ration her soap allowance in order to have such a quantity left over for carving. Turning the simple form over in her hands, she saw again how cunningly it had been made—each scale was perfect, the fins were beautifully rendered, and the line fluent. Bridie closed her eyes and swallowed down the sadness that sat like a lump of brick over her heart.

When Bridie could look at the fish again it seemed to be swimming across her palm towards the lake. She could imagine its pale form settling in among the weeds, its edges softening, loosening into water.

The swan, feeding on the other side of the lake now, sat upright and shook itself, throwing silver droplets of water off its glossy back.

Bridie moved towards the lake bent down, and opened her fingers, releasing Eva's fish into the water. She stood, looking down at it for a long time before turning away towards the road.

Eva's fish would dissolve almost completely by the time Bridie walked here again, and, by the time after that, it would be gone without a trace.

Nan

So I'm at K-Mart, 'Australia's best-performing discount department store,' with my moko Marama. She's sixteen. She wants a pair of jeans, those skinny-leg black ones. Too tight. Wish-I-had-a-long-jumper-to-hide-my-big-bum-tight. But she'll look good in them (though I'm hoping she'll wear a long shirt over the top). Anyway, we go looking for the change room and we can't find it anywhere. Komutu. There's nothing there. And the floor's been painted over with some kind of sealer.

'Come on. That smell could kill you Nan,' says Marama.

We keep moving. But there doesn't seem to be anywhere else to change so we stop one of the girls in a K-Mart frock.

'Yeah,' she says, bright eyes, big smile, a bit excited. 'It's over there. We're having renovations overnight. Every morning I come in and there's something different.'

'She's made for TV that one,' mutters Marama as we move away.

I look at her with a question in my eyes.

'You know, like she's talking up the next season of *Changing Rooms*.'

I must still be looking blank because she acts like she's giving me a clue.

'Reality TV. You know, *Survivor* but with power tools.'

I laugh this time because Marama's got this wicked sense of humour, and it cracks me up the way she acts like she knows everything already. Makes me feel like I'm sixteen again, being out with her.

So, we turn around and look where the girl's pointing and sure enough there's the Change Rooms sign hanging in mid-air bang in the middle of the store and I tell Marama I don't see how we could've missed it.

'Like when you give in and call the RAC man and then, when he arrives, he starts your car first time eh,' says Marama. She knows my car's always breaking down and her brother, he's a mechanic at Gosnells, says I should just fork out for another one.

Anyway, the change room assistant is a young, sweet girl and she smiles at us, counts how many pairs of jeans Marama's got and points us towards this narrow entrance labelled 'Male Change.' Yeah. 'Male Change.' I don't want to make the change room assistant feel bad, because she doesn't look much older than Marama, so I just say, 'Male Change?' and let my voice trail off innocently.

I look at the change room assistant, and she looks at Marama and me, and then we're all three of us whakamā you know. Well, I reckon we weren't the first ones to look like that because

the change room assistant smiles a shiny Colgate smile at us and says, very Colgate bright, 'Yeah. Straight through there to the Women's.'

'Lucky there's no boys here today,' says Marama, all jokey and a bit too loud.

'Lucky', I say back, giving her a wink. 'Through we go'.

Inside, everything's made of shiny white laminate. It's very clean and very very white but it's narrow and we have to pass between two male change rooms to get to 'Female Change.'

I'm feeling a bit off now, wondering how I'd feel if I came in with an armful of under wear and had to walk past a queue of blokes to try on my bras. I'm not squeamish but look at me. I'm five foot three inches. I'm not a tall woman and here there's nowhere to change except right up close to the blokes... There's fights outside that mall sometimes on a Thursday night, and the cops have to come. You know—K-Mart's 'Australia's best performing discount department store,' just like they say on tv so you get all sorts shopping there. The idea of having to walk through a throng of blokes with my personal shopping, knowing that I'm going to strip off behind a flimsy laminate partition. Where's the feel-good factor eh?

Marama's in there now so I stand nearby in case she wants a hand and that means I'm standing right opposite a male change room door and I have a clear view of the entrance. Two young women come in with shirts to try on—Eastern European maybe?—they have that beautiful skin, almond shaped eyes, carefully managed brows. Anyway, they look around and they see the 'Male Change' sign and they look embarrassed and confused, so I raise my not very well managed brows and say, 'Yeah. Crazy eh?'

They nod, but like they wouldn't want anyone to see them agreeing with me. And Marama calls out from inside her cubicle for me to behave myself. Funny thing is, this happens like three or four times while I'm standing there. All the women I see, all different ages and shapes and sizes and looks, are taken aback, and then relieved, to see that mid-afternoon on a Friday there aren't any blokes wanting to use the change rooms.

By this time Marama's done with her jeans and we go back to the change room assistant's desk. I'd like to speak with her, I think to myself, old and meddlesome. So as to save Marama from embarrassment I let her organise me so that she can go off to find another pair of jeans to match the ones she likes.

'You wait for me here Nan, and then we'll go together to the check out.'

I smile at her, like I'm feeling a bit tired, but as soon as Marama's gone, I say,

'Excuse me. Is this a temporary set up while the store's re-arranged?'

'No,' she says switching on her Colgate smile. 'But it's new. This is the first week we've had it here.'

'What do you mean?'



‘We’re being upgraded to a Level C lay out and all the Level C stores have change rooms like this.’

‘Really?’ If this is an “upgrade” I imagine that a “downgrade” would be a strip change behind an open car door out the back.

‘Have you been to Innaloo? Their change room’s been like this for ages.’

I think about the last time I shopped at Innaloo and how I took home two of the same summer shirt in different sizes, figuring that at twelve dollars each I could use the other one as a gift for one of the whanau back home.

‘Yeah,’ I say out loud. ‘Yeah. I’ve been to Innaloo but I didn’t use the change rooms there.’

And then, the change room assistant, who, up until now, has been such a rah rah sales girl, starts telling me, ‘Worst thing is. There’s only two cubicles for the men, so at the weekend it’ll get really busy and we’ll have them backed up outside all along here.’

‘Thanks for that,’ I say. ‘I’m glad you told me. Better not bring my sixteen year old moko here to try on bras at the weekend.’

The change room assistant’s eyes go round then, and I don’t think she’s surprised when I ask her if I can speak to her manager. It takes ages for someone to come, and of course Marama is back by then and giving me her Perth-special, OMG-look.

To tell the truth it hurts me to make her feel embarrassed but if I don’t say anything none of these other women are going to, even though all of them look as embarrassed about the new set up as I am.

Marama is a sensible girl, so she just stands over by the rack holding the clothes that need to be returned to the displays, and looks down at the ground, pretending that she isn’t with me.

The floor manager comes along then and he’s young and fresh faced, like the change room assistant—just a baby really—so I take care to be very polite and do my best to smile an Australian smile, a nice, white, Colgate smile like the change room assistant, even though I have a gap tooth and some gold fillings. Anyway, I ask the floor manager to come into the change room with me and to stand where I’m standing and to imagine leading a young girl in there to try on a handful of bras. That embarrasses him, as I thought it might, and so I feel even worse because shaming people is not what I like to do. He turns red eh. And then he says, pointing to a rubber runner on the floor, ‘Perhaps they’re going to put a sliding door across here to separate off the male change and the female change.’

‘Okay.’ I say, catching the eye of the change room assistant. ‘What about weekends, when there’s a queue of big guys here?’ And I indicate with my hands the way that big, tall guys seem to lean over small women.

‘I’m not so very religious or anything but I wouldn’t want to walk...I mean what about young Muslim girls, or the older Greek and Italian ladies...It’s not nice for them, or for us, and we’re Australian,’ I say, meaning we’ve lived here a long time, not that we’re citizens exactly.

You have to understand that I’m trying to work it out at the same time as I’m explaining it to him, and I know I’m not doing a very good job, probably because I don’t want to be too hard on him, or come across like a difficult customer, and by this time poor Marama’s got hot feet and wants to be anywhere but in the shop waiting for her bossy Nan. Even I don’t understand what I mean—‘Even us. We’re Australian,’ I’d said—as though Australians have a lower standard than everyone else...Okay, I was trying to let him off the hook a bit, suggesting he might not understand what I was saying about different people having different ideas and so on...I mean...I don’t know where he’s from. He looks white but that doesn’t mean anything...And what did I mean by—‘Even us. We’re Australian?’ Now he’ll be looking at me with my beautiful brown skin and he’ll be thinking I don’t look Australian so I’m about to launch into another kōrero, to try and explain myself when Marama, in desperation, mimes for us to leave the store, and then,

‘Yes,’ he says, ‘Yes. I see what you mean. I’ll pass your feedback on.’

‘Thank you for that,’ I say. ‘You have a good day.’

‘He knows, and you know, that no one will do anything about it,’ says Marama as we head for the automatic check out, ‘I don’t know why you bother.’

‘You know me. I’ve got a big mouth.’

‘Yeah. You do.’

‘Runs in the family.’

Marama laughs with me then, but afterwards she says, ‘We can always shop online and try things on at home.’

‘Aye. And you can wear a long jumper over those new jeans girl.’

Ahead of us in the queue on the way out there’s a Sikh family. The grandmother wears a sari. The father wears a turban. The two girls wear cotton print dresses over skivvies and tights, and their long plaits of hair fall down below their waists. They smile at us, and, seeing that we only have two pairs of jeans to put through, they let us go first. And the automatic check out says,

‘Thank you for shopping at K-Mart, Australia’s best-performing discount department store.’

‘It’s been our very great pleasure,’ I say. ‘Ka kite.’

Unfolding

**From:** [carol05@iinet.net.au](mailto:carol05@iinet.net.au)

**Date:** Mon 6 March 2017

**To:** [tlazarus@gmail.com](mailto:tlazarus@gmail.com)

Hi T,

Thanks for the SMS. Yes. The residency started today!

I have The Writers' House, solitude, and a view of eucalypts for a month. Sadly, I won't be using the bedroom with its antique shutters and built-in porch, as I can't find a way to magic away three kids. Still, having a room of my own is a relief.

The house is a gorgeous mix. Outside, it's all colonial veranda: inside it's arts and crafts—beaten copper and stained glass. Only the kitchen's been updated. It even has a new fridge-freezer. A bucket of dip, four lumps of cheese, and two wizened courgettes were squatting in there when I arrived. And there's half a Turkish bread, two lasagnes, a tray of hot dogs, yum cha, and soy milk in the freezer. Western Australian writers are either a multi-cultural lot, or white and middle class with cosmopolitan taste. What does it say about me I wonder, that the jar of biscuits and three kinds of instant coffee made me feel most at home?

Tucked inside the visitors' book I found a cluster of apricot-coloured hexagons. They were labelled: 'Writers' Workshops,' 'Art Therapy,' 'Book Clubs,' 'Beer on the Veranda at Five,' and, my favourite, 'Playhouse.' I put that one on my trestle under the window. I'm hoping it will remind me to improvise when I get stuck.

About then I realised I was procrastinating, perhaps missing the domestic chores I've always resented. I sat down to work. Outside the window, two cyclists and a jogger with a yellow backpack passed by. Nobody stopped.

XX

**From:** [carol05@iinet.net.au](mailto:carol05@iinet.net.au)

**Date:** Tues 7 March 2017

**To:** [tlazarus@gmail.com](mailto:tlazarus@gmail.com)

Hi T,

You're right of course. If there's to be a book, I'll have to stop researching and start writing. But what if, when I sit down to write, I find nothing to say? 'Migration' seemed a reasonable enough topic when I started out but how can I meaningfully add to a conversation that suddenly the whole world is having and living, like a conflagration?

Should I write long lines of people boarding and disembarking; people burdened by luggage; or with nothing at all, but burdened, all the same, by the things they have seen and heard and are unable to leave behind? Perhaps I should write of planes arriving and departing, asylum seekers on boats, refugees washing up on the shore, whole countries emptying out. The pageant of our times: The Exodus, again and again and again. So many send offs, so many outpourings, so much pain, and hope.

How can I write images like these? We've seen them all already. And last November, a man on a temporary immigrant visa set fire to himself in a Melbourne bank.

In the eyes of some (mainly male colleagues) I will no doubt render myself a lesser version of what I might be by acknowledging my limitations, but, as Virginia Woolf put it:

One can only show how one came to hold whatever opinion one does hold. One can only give one's audience the chance of drawing their own conclusions as they observe the limitations, the prejudices, the idiosyncrasies of the speaker<sup>3</sup>.

One of the writers I've met here (you would like her) has a bright red mug she brought back from an American writing conference emblazoned with the words—'Write like a mother fucker!' I shall try it.

XX

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<sup>3</sup>Woolf, V. (1993). *A Room of One's Own*, p. 3.

PS: Reading this over, I hope you won't think I'm whinging. I'm not. I'm getting on with it. I have been writing...and I've discovered the Battye Library and the Battye librarians. If all else fails, I may join them. C

**From:** [carol05@inet.net.au](mailto:carol05@inet.net.au)

**Date:** Wed 8 March 2017

**To:** [trobenson@gmail.com](mailto:trobenson@gmail.com)

Hi T,

I was messing about on my phone last night (pretending to do some research) and came across that photo of us—You, me and the Katherine Mansfield statue. Thank you (again). I'm so glad we squeezed in that morning before I left for Perth.

A fly has died on my table since yesterday. After depositing him in the bin (why should it be a him?) I made a list of all the things I could possibly work on while I'm here:

### **The List**

- Immigrant experience in the nineteenth century.
- Being a migrant (a NZ migrant) and becoming 'Australian'. What does that even mean?
- How might a new migrant meet the first Australians first, in the twentieth or twenty-first century?
- A Jewish homeland in the Kimberley?
- Post-Tampa/Post 9/11. Twenty-first century stories—the girls from high school.

Have to leave early. David has a big day on, and the kids and the babysitter have locked themselves out. Am stopping writing now to make a new roster. Mustn't give up! XX

**From:** [carol05@inet.net.au](mailto:carol05@inet.net.au)

**Thursday 9 March, 2017**

**To:** [tlazarus@gmail.com](mailto:tlazarus@gmail.com)

Dear T,

Back at my desk this afternoon, after a seminar at the State Library which houses the Battye. Did you know that 90,000 young women came to Australia on assisted passages in the nineteenth century to work as domestic servants? I didn't until today. C.

**From:** [carol05@inet.net.au](mailto:carol05@inet.net.au)

**Friday 10 March, 2017**

**To:** [tlazarus@gmail.com](mailto:tlazarus@gmail.com)

Hi T,

I've begun work on a series of fragments about Eva, one of the servant girls profiled at the seminar yesterday. At least I feel that I've made a start. A few different starts actually, perhaps because I don't want to be categorical about where or when the story begins...and ends. How does the writer know where to stop? How many letters 'home' do you have to write before the new country becomes 'home'? If you feel you belong have you stopped being a 'new chum,' a 'new Australian,' an 'immigrant of non-English speaking background, a 'refugee'? Where exactly does the immigrant story end? Does it? Ever?

XX

**From:** [carol05@iinet.net.au](mailto:carol05@iinet.net.au)

**Monday 13 March, 2017**

**To:** [tlazarus@gmail.com](mailto:tlazarus@gmail.com)

Dear T,

I wrote a poem this morning to stave off panic at not getting to the big stuff—Eva's story. Perhaps I need more than one girl? Perhaps the fragments are dated?

I've had another go at the poem this evening, and include it here. You will recognise everyone (but I hope in a good way).

XX

### **Letter to a Friend**

Thank you for the blanket you gave me  
for the new baby, last time I came home  
the year my father died.

You were plaiting shabbos loaves, your  
blue-armed son in plaster  
your daughter playing with the dog.

Freshly reminded of life's temporality,  
I tried to digitise the scene—*Wellington  
afternoon with challah baking.*

We've kept your blanket handy for  
sleeping and waking, also for cubby  
building and camping.

We have spoken your name all over  
Western Australia because we carried  
your blanket with us.



I should have sent you photos  
like a gnome—  
*Hello from Kalbarri!*

*Wish you were here!*  
But I was busy and didn't think  
of it at the time. I'm sorry

we have not always been able  
to keep your blanket free of chocolate  
icing, baby puke, snot and tears

but we have loved it, soaked it  
given it a wash and hung it  
in the sun to dry.

When I have finished writing I  
will fold your blanket—warm  
as newly risen bread—

make up a parcel  
stand in line at the Post Office  
send it home.

**From:** [carol05@iinet.net.au](mailto:carol05@iinet.net.au)

**Tuesday, 14 March, 2017**

**To:** [tlazarus@gmail.com](mailto:tlazarus@gmail.com)

Dear T,

I'm relieved the blanket's arrived safely. Just after we moved here, I sent a manuscript back to NZ to a competition and it took twenty-two days to get there. It was supposed to take seven! Until then I'd always posted things with the happy optimism of a three-year-old, but now I hold my breath like a toddler who's afraid of putting her head under water.

This morning, three magpies preened themselves in the tree outside my window while the sprinklers sprayed the decimated earth like billy-o. A spurt and whisk of water and a sun shower occluded my view. When it passed, a sea of glittering mud replaced the scuffed and furry dirt, while great arcs of white curved over the ground, spraying the lower leaves of the trees. And when the sprinkler came round towards me it clattered across the veranda, watering the sill of the open window. Fountains, jets, fountains, waterspouts. The lowest leaves of the trees were dripping, and the magpies came down to the newly silvered earth, as though they were water birds. Bathing, ruffling, chortling.

I chided myself for being such a tourist, taken in by the everyday sight of maggies; but I couldn't help admiring their jubilation. Each time the sprinkler came round I braced myself, as though it were a fire hose that might extend its range since the last time it passed. Whisked up by the breeze from the sprinklers, the Playhouse hexagon fell off onto the floor. As I bent to pick it up, the sprinklers stopped. Silence. And then, even more birds.

I'm wondering now...are there birds in the story? C

**From:** [carol05@iinet.net.au](mailto:carol05@iinet.net.au)

**Wednesday, 15 March, 2017**

**To:** [tlazarus@gmail.com](mailto:tlazarus@gmail.com)

Dear T,

I read these lines by Judith Wright the other day:

Pioneers, oh pioneers! A lot of rot was talked about them. As though they had been better than human creatures, as though they had been equipped with an extra allowance of endurance, virtue, nobility, as though they had been— clichés.<sup>4</sup>

This passage comes from a short story called 'The Weeping Fig' in which a man walks off the land, after his wife and two children have died there. It made me think of all those young women—1,700 of them came to Western Australia—too many for them all to have lived happily ever after. Researchers around Australasia, who have matched ships lists with marriage registrations, suggest that 'a little over half of them married'. What happened to the little under half? XX

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<sup>4</sup> Wright, J. 'The Weeping Fig' (1963). In Hadgraft and Wilson (Eds). *A Century of Australian Stories*, pp. 226-231.

**From:** [carol05@iinet.net.au](mailto:carol05@iinet.net.au)

**Thursday 16, March, 2017**

**To:** [tlazarus@gmail.com](mailto:tlazarus@gmail.com)

Dear T,

I spent today at the State Records Office where they have a police file on Eva, and the circumstances surrounding her death. I'll need to go back to search the general police files, and the matron's diary for the ship she came on, but today I'm clearing emails and firing them off—so many historical questions. C

**From:** [carol05@iinet.net.au](mailto:carol05@iinet.net.au)

**Friday, 17 March, 2017**

**To:** [tlazarus@gmail.com](mailto:tlazarus@gmail.com)

Hi T,

Yes! I get that schizoid home/work split thing too. The constant back and forth between the family and the house is making me crazy. Nothing I wrote this morning was what I needed to write, and this afternoon the babysitter and the kids locked themselves out of the house (again!).

I was determined to write something this morning that didn't require so much historical knowledge. Thought I'd begin with a scene at the Immigrant Depot; the Irish girls settling in for their last night together, but I couldn't find the voice. Agh! How to catch that nineteenth century Irish thing?

At noon I gave up and went out onto the veranda. I was just in time to see three men putting up the footy goals. At least I think that's what they were. Three men. Four white poles.

XX

**From:** [carol05@iinet.net.au](mailto:carol05@iinet.net.au)

**Sunday, 19 March, 2017**

**To:** [tlazarus@gmail.com](mailto:tlazarus@gmail.com)

Hi T,

David did the kids this morning, and I managed to get back to the State Library to look at Kitty Page's shipboard journal. I'm quite excited about her. I think she might be the source for my second character, who I have named Bridget (Bridie), on the advice of two Irish women in my writing group.

While I was at the State Library, I used the microfiche to read some letters written by immigrant girls to the British Women's Emigration Association back in Britain (BWEA). As I clacked and whizzed through the spools of microfiche, breathing in its warm tacky scent, I felt strangely comforted. It was like being an undergrad back in Wellington in the eighties. And the letters—they're formal of course, a little stiff, but they have the sound of real girls. Am I getting bogged down in research again? I don't think so, but I'm a little afraid to tell you that I've checked out an audio book of Colm Toibin's short stories to help me with the Irish sound. Really, it's okay. I'll listen to them in the car ☺.

**From:** [carol05@iinet.net.au](mailto:carol05@iinet.net.au)

**Monday, 20 March, 2017**

**To:** [tlazarus@gmail.com](mailto:tlazarus@gmail.com)

Dear T,

Thank you for sending me Charlotte MacDonald's book on female immigrants to New Zealand. It contains many helpful details re. shipboard life, and the various outcomes for the immigrant girls trans-Tasman. You are a wonder! Oh, why can't you move to Perth and continue being my friend down the road? XX

PS: I've found a wonderful description by one of Charlotte's girls. She writes that being at sea was 'discombobulating.' C.

**From:** [carol05@iinet.net.au](mailto:carol05@iinet.net.au)

**Tuesday, 21 March, 2017**

**To:** [tlazarus@gmail.com](mailto:tlazarus@gmail.com)

Dear T,

Getting on with the girls' stories! Back at the State Records Office, I came across a hand written note from Eva's employer seeking her re-admittance to the Immigrant Depot/Women's Home. The employer wanted to re-admit Eva on a Saturday which was apparently quite irregular. At that time only the Superintendent of Relief, and one or two other officials, had the power to admit girls to the Home...The note suggests that Eva's re-admission was a matter of urgency, and it has made it possible for me to track the family Eva worked for to an address in Claremont...C.

PS: I've had a poem accepted for publication in a Western Australian anthology! Does that make me a WA writer?

**From:** [carol05@iinet.net.au](mailto:carol05@iinet.net.au)

**Wednesday, 22 March, 2017**

**To:** [tlazarus@gmail.com](mailto:tlazarus@gmail.com)

Dear T,

I gave a workshop on Sunday, using movement, and an exploration of our walks, to create characters. The Writers' House has a wonderful big front room with a wooden floor, and we were all women this time. After the break, we were feeling comfortable and I felt this urge to form a circle—to make our movement circular. I could feel the energy, the hum of us going down, deep into those old boards and I yearned to spring up off them, to lighten and lift off, to give rise to something altogether simpler as we walked into ourselves. When we began the running exercises, one of the women stretched her arms out wide, like a child becoming an aeroplane, 'I'm flat footed,' she said. 'I never would have made it into the army.' And then she took off, running across the room.

Her words stayed with me afterwards—'I never would have made it into the army.' I keep recalling that by the time Eva came out to WA there were strict recruitment processes in place for women

seeking assisted passage. If she were unwell, possibly depressive, as the archives suggest she was, how did she make it through that recruitment process? Did she seem okay to them? Perhaps her mental health deteriorated afterwards. On the journey? Or after she went to work at Claremont?

Thanks for reminding me about the RSVP's for Anne's wedding. I didn't manage to get to my email at all over the weekend due to the workshop and mad family arrangements. I'm afraid we're not in a position to come back. I'm going now to email her a mazel tov. XX

**From:** [carol05@inet.net.au](mailto:carol05@inet.net.au)

**Friday, 24 March, 2017**

**To:** [tlazarus@gmail.com](mailto:tlazarus@gmail.com)

Dear T,

Have just been for a mammogram which I hate, always feeling so reduced without a shirt or bra, naked to the waist in the lime green gown. Why must they push and squash so hard to get a perfect image? Surely they understand that, when they push down hard, there can be no give?

Back into the shipboard scenes today and, feeling vulnerable myself, I wonder again about Eva's state of mind. Did she understand that she was going so far away and that she would never come back? And, if she did not realise this immediately, when and how did she work it out?

Sorry, bit self-absorbed. Should have something to send you soon. XX

**From:** [carol05@inet.net.au](mailto:carol05@inet.net.au)

**Monday, 27 March, 2017**

**To:** [tlazarus@gmail.com](mailto:tlazarus@gmail.com)

Dear T,

Thank you for being so understanding about Anne's wedding and for reading my patchy first draft. To answer your questions: Yes, as I've said, Eva is based on a real person. A young woman named Kate Teehan who came to Perth on an assisted passage in the late 1890s and suicided within two

months of disembarking at Fremantle. People who held positions of responsibility in relation to her described her as ‘slow,’ ‘melancholic’ and ‘of limited intellect,’ (though how they could tell that, without formally testing her I don’t know!).

I’ve changed the name of everyone in the story except for Miss Monk, the shipboard matron and chaperone. Miss Monk was an Australasian institution (she chaperoned girls to NZ too) and I felt that giving her a new name would be akin to renaming the governor.

We will never know if Eva’s death was intentional or an accident. We do know that Eva died after spilling kerosene from a hand lamp on her clothing, which then caught fire. She was in an out-building that served as a toilet at the time, and it was seven o’clock on a summer morning.

What bothers me most is that even with the exigencies of immigration, and her propensity for depression (or something that looked like it to contemporary observers) I feel as though I’ve missed part of the story. I’m beginning to think that Eva might have been severely mistreated while at Claremont. Certainly, if something went wrong she would have had no one to turn to. C

**From:** [carol05@iinet.net.au](mailto:carol05@iinet.net.au)

**Tuesday, 28 March, 2017**

**To:** [tlazarus@gmail.com](mailto:tlazarus@gmail.com)

Dear T,

Am feeling wrung out by the injustice of Eva’s situation. How to write now without sounding polemical or grim?

Went for a walk at Lake Herdsman this afternoon. The green and brown of reeds, white trunks of trees, the grass a soft cushion beneath my feet as I walked towards two Ibis, sleek, gleaming, iridescent in the sun.

Afterwards I picked up *Upside Down World*, a book I had requested from the library in which Australian wildlife is depicted and interpreted by nineteenth century explorers and artists. Black swans were seen to be this neat (and dodgy) inversion of everything the settlers had ever known. A black swan graced the first postage stamps produced here.

I know what you mean about life's details. We're still in touch constantly but we don't share the dailyness of each other's lives in the same way. It's weird knowing that I won't be at Anne's wedding. I never would have imagined missing it. I'm beginning to feel that even in the twenty-first century, when you decide to migrate, you don't really understand the decision you're making, and how it will change you, until afterwards. XX

**From:** [carol05@iinet.net.au](mailto:carol05@iinet.net.au)

**Wednesday, 29 March, 2017**

**To:** [tlazarus@gmail.com](mailto:tlazarus@gmail.com)

Dear T,

You asked me whether Kate Teehan (the girl on whom Eva's character is based) was the only young woman to commit suicide in this period. No. There seem to have been a few in Western Australia in the 1890s—how many precisely I don't know.

I went today to the Attorney General's Department, to the Registry of Births, Deaths and Marriages, and ordered a copy of Agnes Howard's death certificate. I will have to wait for the paper copy to arrive in the mail, but I was able to view it on screen straight away:



Name	Sex	Age	Profession	Cause of Death
Agnes Gertrude Howard	Female	19 yrs	Single woman	Inquest Verdict : That she came to her death by drowning whilst temporary insane on 2 <sup>nd</sup> February 1895.

Can anyone reading such details, sparse though they are, not receive an immediate impression of Agnes's misery? A brief reference to Agnes's situation is made in Jan Gothard's *Blue China*. The suggestion there is that Agnes had turned down an offer of marriage, and left her prospective suitor behind in Great Britain. A broken heart might have contributed to her unhappiness, but Agnes had been living in the Swan River colony for two years or longer when she died. I suspect multiple factors contributed to her 'temporary insanity'.

When I saw Agnes's death certificate, what I had taken to be known truths and certainties seemed suddenly less true and certain. Like the middle-class women who supported the single female immigration schemes at the time (such as the members of the BWEA), I had assumed that the young women sent to live and work in private homes, so far from their own families and all they knew, would have met with hospitality and kindness. While generally that may have been the case, it cannot be assumed, and I'm a bit shocked at myself for falling into such an obvious pothole.

Even though I had already researched Kate Teehan, and knew the essentials of Agnes's story, I realise that I have, in my secret self, continued to subscribe to the story we tell ourselves so frequently: the Cinderella story. Poor servant girl is transformed through stellar marriage into matriarch and citizen of the colony.

Something about the blunt details of Agnes's death, blinking at me from the computer screen discombobulated me. As Bridie might say, I was all at sea. This was not a new feeling. I recognised it from the year of my mother's death and the 'here in body but not in spirit' days after we first immigrated. It's a feeling I associate with moments of definitive change. Moments when all you have taken for granted is removed, like a cloak from around your shoulders, and you are forced to re-examine the fundamentals of who you think you are. Certain idealistic assumptions that I have held on to about the benevolence of the assisted immigration schemes, and those that employed the women and girls, need to be re-examined. C.

**From:** [carol05@iinet.net.au](mailto:carol05@iinet.net.au)

**Thursday, 30 March, 2017**

**To:** [tlazarus@gmail.com](mailto:tlazarus@gmail.com)

Dear T,

Having spent the morning thinking about how I might create a sense of Eva's own agency, I turned to Jenny Bornholdt and read:

...Noel has been painting the most  
commonly caught fish in Australia. Murray Cod

is a huge river fish, caught most successfully using  
a scorched starling as bait. How did anyone  
discover that?<sup>5</sup>

How indeed? And how strange that a Kiwi woman poet should know this about Australia and put it in her clever book of poetry which I, a 'new Australian' myself, should happen to be reading here on the western edge of the continent?

Now I'm wondering...might Eva be a creator of things? An introvert, a slow processor, a day-dreamer, a maker? C.

PS: If you haven't read any Bornholdt, you must. She's terrifically New Zild.

**From:** [carol05@iinet.net.au](mailto:carol05@iinet.net.au)

**Friday 31 March, 2017**

**To:** [tlazarus@gmail.com](mailto:tlazarus@gmail.com)

Dear T,

Driving over this morning, I saw suddenly that the streetlights along West Coast Highway look like weird antennae; something off a beetle drawing from that paper and pencil game we used to play as kids. Perhaps if I throw a six a body will fly in. Or legs.

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<sup>5</sup> Bornholdt, J. (2008). *The Rocky Shore*, p. 29.

Paper copies of the two death certificates have arrived. They've been stamped with a round stamp 'Western Australia. District Registry of Perth', and a black swan sits in the middle.

Still working on a re-draft and agonising over the scenes with PC Bremworth.

Mazel tov for the wedding. I shall be there in spirit!

XX

**From:** [carol05@iinet.net.au](mailto:carol05@iinet.net.au)

**Monday, 3 April, 2017**

**To:** [tlazarus@gmail.com](mailto:tlazarus@gmail.com)

Dear T,

At last! At last! I have a draft!

Have just come back inside after celebrating with a walk. I feel as though I'm surfacing from a trance. There is a moth among the leaves of the flat leaf parsley and a sprawling pumpkin vine has swamped the aloe vera. As I sat back down to write this a kookaburra slid into my view on one side of the house and a kid scooted by on the other.

Look forward to your comments. XX

PS: Wedding pics please. C

**From:** [carol05@iinet.net.au](mailto:carol05@iinet.net.au)

**Friday, 7 April, 2017**

**To:** [tlazarus@gmail.com](mailto:tlazarus@gmail.com)

Dear T,

Thanks for the photos and for reading my new draft.

No. Eva's death was not investigated with the thoroughness or empathy that I have suggested in the story. There was no Bridie and no PC Bremworth in real life. The Police Department General Files show that the Police were not made aware of Eva's death until 10:30 pm that night, although she died around 9 am. And there is no document extant that suggests that Eva's previous employer was interviewed, or the matron of the Immigrant Depot, or Miss Monk or any of the immigrant girls.

If I consider all of this from a twenty-first century standpoint, it makes me incredibly angry but that's the way things were done, back then, in a time and place so very different from our own. It's precisely because so little effort was made to discover what had gone wrong, and to tell Eva's story, that I've imagined and written into the gaps. Inevitably my story (and it is fiction after all) contains, as Virginia would say, 'more truth than fact'<sup>6</sup>.

C.

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<sup>6</sup> Woolf, V. (1993). *A Room of One's Own*, p. 3.

Jo seemed apologetic as she drove into the park on Friday afternoon. She explained, that the lake, though swimmable, was a railway dam walled in by the West Australian government in the 1890s. She hoped he would like it. Li smiled and recounted his own nervousness when, on their trip to Malaysia, he'd taken her to the Cameron Highlands where the British had cut a hole in the forest to build a holiday resort. He picked up the Shire of Mundaring brochure from the door pocket and began to compare its contents with the view outside the window.

A hot weekend was forecast and already several families were setting up pop tops and tents while their kids played footy on the gravel road. Li and Jo chose a site on the edge of the main camp where they could be closer to the water and further away from the crowd.

It was Li who had suggested they come away camping at Chinese New Year but once they'd set up their small dome tent he began, almost reflexively, to look around for compatriots. During his time living away from Malaysia, he has seldom spent the holiday in Australia, and on those occasions Paul and his wife Lynda have been happy to take him in. Li first met Paul after he graduated from UWA and went to work in the same IT company. Both men have done well, but Paul has spoken often lately about the glass ceiling he experiences as a Chinese employee. The two men have discussed setting up their own consultancy as some of their friends have done. Paul's recent news made it seem unlikely now, and Li busied himself perfecting the line of the tent fly.

'We probably won't need that,' said Jo, smiling and gesturing to Li's handiwork as she returned from the campsite kitchen. 'It won't rain. Fancy a swim?'

Li struck out hard so that when Jo arrived he was already standing, wet and pumped, on the pontoon. He grinned. It felt good to have beaten her—this Jo who grew up with swimming lessons and trips to the beach. After arriving in Perth, he'd joined a class for adult beginners.

'Hi ya,' said Jo, smiling up at him as she climbed the ladder.

'Do you reckon this is goose poo?' asked Li, eyeing the splattered surface of the pontoon.

'Probably.' Jo perched on the edge where the concentration of droppings was lightest.

'Where I come from guano can kill you.'

'Bat guano,' laughed Jo. 'Actually, if a bird poops on you in Australia it's supposed to be lucky.'

'That's not Australian. That's Feng Shui, and sitting in it doesn't count.'

They sat in silence for a moment, gazing up at the lake's top end where the water blended into the mix of Jarrah and Marri trees. In mid-summer the edges of the lake were little more than bog and reeds. The beach sand was trucked in from elsewhere.

‘Do you believe in luck?’ asked Li.

‘You know I don’t.’

Li was about to say something more but Jo’s tone was dismissive. ‘Come on!’ he said, diving off the pontoon with a splash and making for the next beach along. As he swam, he kicked off a length of water weed that entangled his legs. He slowed down then, so as to enjoy the water which was deliciously warm in patches before going cool again. Twice he dove down and was surprised to see clouds of small fish dash away from him and, on surfacing, a turtle which he mistook for a piece of wood. As he neared the shore a swamp hen flew up from the reeds with a squawk, clumsily drawing its legs up like the under carriage of an aircraft. Jo swam up behind him and took his foot in her hand. He snatched it back and dove towards her so that she was forced in deeper. When they kissed she tasted of lake water.

Looking back on it afterwards, Li had to admit he was put out the next morning when he woke to find Jo trimming her nails with the scissor attachment from her Swiss Army knife. The sliver moons of Jo’s nails flicked off into the ring of stones they’d use for a campfire if it were winter, but it was summer and there was a complete fire ban in place. Li quickly wriggled out of their tent and stood up. ‘Hey. Don’t do that.’

Jo’s car keys jangled beneath the key ring of her knife, as she continued methodically positioning the scissors, and bringing the tiny blades together.

‘What?’

‘Don’t cut your nails.’

Jo stopped and looked at him. ‘Why not?’

‘You’ll cut the stream of your luck.’ Even as he said it Li felt ridiculous but he was relieved too, when she finished snipping one hand and folded her scissors away.

‘Now I’m all wonky,’ she said. ‘Does that mean I’ll have a wonky year?’

‘Gong Xi Fa Cai,’ said Li, handing her a mandarin, with both hands, as though he were his grandmother offering her ang pow.

‘You too,’ Jo smiled.

Li peeled his fruit and broke it into segments, enjoying the festive scent.

‘Have you ever been to a casino?’ he asked, putting a piece of fruit into his mouth.

Jo bit a small hole in one side of her mandarin, and began sucking the juice into her mouth through the opening.

‘Why do you ask?’

‘No reason.’

‘You wouldn’t have asked me if there wasn’t a reason.’

Li chewed carefully and Jo spoke again, before he could answer, ‘Have you?’

‘Yeah. With friends.

‘Chinese friends?’

‘Chinese Malaysian, Ah Tong, Korean.’

‘You never went with me.’

‘I thought you’d be shocked.’

Jo laughed and focussed all her attention on squeezing the last remaining drops out of her mandarin.

‘You know...You’re Christian...No gambling. No superstition...Strict, strict, strict.’ Li brought his hand down onto the back of his other palm, as though it were a chopping board. He spoke lightly but Jo noticed that his Cantonese inflection was stronger than usual.

‘My Aunt converted to Christianity. She so strict she won’t eat with us. My Dad’s birthday last time—the food was served above the shop, offered on the altar. Ai-yah. She walk in. She walk out’. Li brushed his hands together. ‘Nothing to do with us anymore.’

‘You think I’m like that? Li was silent, finishing his mandarin.

‘I do Christmas and Easter,’ Jo licked juice off her fingers. ‘Presents and chocolate.’

‘So, when you go to church with your parents it’s—’

‘Something like that,’ said Jo and, with a quick irritation that Li didn’t understand, she stood up and made for the lake.

Li watched Jo’s tidy stroke as she headed off in her kayak. A ‘V’ was opening up in the water behind her, as though she were headed towards the horizon line, and a vanishing point from which he wouldn’t be able to bring her back. Li opened his mouth to call out to her, but at the last moment he turned away and sat in the shade. He leaned back on his elbows and shook off his flip flops, wriggling his toes into the cool sand.

Further along the beach two couples arrived loaded up with a cacophony of beach gear and a gaggle of children. A toddler in a swim nappy brought up the rear. Li watched surreptitiously as one of the dads settled in to blow up an enormous green inflatable. He pursed his lips, drew air deep into his lungs and blew it out, cheeks bulging. Not wanting to be caught watching, Li looked away to where the children were lined up, their toes already tickling at the lake edge.

The taller of the Mums called out, ‘Wait for Dad. He’ll be there in a minute.’

Dad moved the green plastic away from his chin and glanced down. The inflatable had responded infinitesimally and hung in his hands like a limp balloon. He blew again, eyes almost exploding out of their sockets. Poor guy, thought Li, as he glanced back towards the children.

‘Josie!’ The mother’s voice came again as the toddler dashed, splashing into the water. One of the older children grabbed at her, but the ensuing squeals and laughter only goaded the toddler to

plunge into the water more deeply. Now the mums arrived together. One grabbed up Josie; the other waded out and turned to face the shore.

‘Off you go then,’ she called like a field marshal at a school sports carnival and then, as her husband came towards her down the sand, ‘Oh my God! What is that?’

‘I got it in Hong Kong. Isn’t it great?’

Li looked around at mention of the island city, famous among his parents’ generation for family reunions. Dad was coming down the beach, his biceps on proud display as he held an enormous, and fully inflated, Chinese dragon above his curly hair and thoroughly zinc-protected nose.

Li smiled broadly and shook his head. What are the odds, he thought, of meeting an Aussie family with a Hong Kong connection all the way out here? Suddenly he felt more connected to the Chinese holiday and he thought of his parents; they would be feeling his absence from the family gathering back home. He stood up and walked down towards the water, standing with his toes tucked into the sand.

The kids were now clambering aboard their dragon inflatable and Josie, not to be left out of the fun, broke loose from her mother and ran straight back into the water. Before anyone could stop her she was in chest deep and still trying to catch up with the bigger kids,

‘Not you Josie! Not you!’

‘Mum! Josie’s following us.’

Li could see that Josie’s mum was too far off to intervene so he lunged forward and grabbed the toddler just as she fell, face first into the water and her feet lifted up off the bottom. Josie screamed then, and strained forward out of Li’s grasp, her sturdy legs thrashing, her plump arms stretched out towards her brother and sister, who sat smugly enjoying their ride.

‘Hey. Big brother won’t bite you,’ said Li, but Josie was inconsolable and swung around, looking for her mother.

‘You’re a life saver,’ said the young woman.

‘Happy to help.’

Back at the tent, Li changed his wet clothes and put his walking shoes on. He’d read that there was a pleasant three-kilometre circuit around the lake’s perimeter, and thought he might also catch up with Jo along the way, although he wasn’t sure she’d be in the mood for company. As it happened Li missed her as she lapped back and forth. He stopped on the far beach, opposite the campsite and waited for Jo to paddle over.



Jo bent her legs and pulled the boat up, tucking the paddle inside before flopping down in the shade. Li thought he could see a residue of tension in the lines around her mouth, and he was glad he hadn't been so foolish as to offer his help.

'Hear you saved the day back there,' said Jo, nodding towards the main beach.

'That's me, newest ethnic celebrity.'

'You are a tad conspicuous.'

Li said nothing, and then—'Why'd you take off in such a hurry this morning?'

'I didn't like the way you were spouting off about Christians,' Jo, made bunny ears around the last word with her fingers.

'I was talking about my Aunt.'

'Even so, not all Christians are fundamentalists—'

Jo's words tore away in the wind as a helicopter flew in from behind them. The surface of the lake peaked up into waves as the chopper descended and they braced themselves against the draught and noise of the propellers.

'Must be a fire somewhere back there,' mouthed Jo, covering her ears and pointing inland with her elbow. Li felt ridiculous speaking with his hands over his ears but nodded towards the chopper, 'Is that a monsoon bucket?'

'Yeah. I've seen them fill fire trucks here too.' Jo was still shouting but the chopper had lifted off with a full bucket of water and was already some distance away.

'No need to shout,' Li said loudly into the silence.

'But I want to!' shouted Jo with her hands cupped around her mouth. Li laughed then and they both collapsed back on the sand.

'Relax.'

'Yeah,' Li touched Jo's face, moving a stray hair away from her eyes before rolling away from her.

'What's the matter?'

'It's Paul. He's in trouble.'

Even as he said it Li felt like a character out of one of the low budget American mini-series they show on TV in Malaysia, but he didn't know how else to go about it. Already he felt that he should have told her sooner, but he didn't want to have an argument on New Year. Still, he couldn't seem to free himself to enjoy the weekend while he kept Paul's story a secret. He rubbed his neck and looked away.

'At work?' Jo asked.

'Financially.'

'How?'

‘He started asking to borrow money...’ Li hesitated.

‘Go on.’

‘We’d go down to the food court at lunchtime and Paul would have forgotten his wallet. I’d pay for him, or one of the others would. This happened a few times. And then he asked me for a bus fare.’

‘That was odd.’

‘Yeah. That’s what I thought. But he didn’t ask me again, so I didn’t say anything,’ Li stood up and walked away. When he turned back to face her, he could feel the muscle at one side of his mouth twitching. He cleared his throat, ‘They’ll have to sell their house.’

‘What about Lynda and the kids?’ Jo’s voice was flat.

‘They’ve gone to her family. Paul’s at his brother’s.’ Li turned away then, so that Jo couldn’t see his face. ‘I loaned him twenty grand.’

‘Oh my God. You loaned Paul twenty thousand dollars?’

‘It’s just money.’

‘Just money? Twenty thousand dollars?’

‘Paul’s like family.’

‘I know...I just...’ Jo put her hand up to the side of her face and swiped at it, moving a strand of hair away from her mouth.

In the silence, Li heard the helicopter coming back and he moved away from the water. Even so the draught off the chopper and the noise seemed to take him over, to cut right through him. He stood with his back to the water, closed his eyes and put his hands over his ears. When the helicopter had passed and Li looked again at the beach, he saw that Jo had pushed her kayak into the water. Her face was set and before Li could stop her, she was back in her boat and paddling away. He wanted to call out to her, to close the gap he saw opening between them, but he stayed silent.

That evening they walked out along the edge of the lake, listening. The day’s humming insects had been replaced by a chorus of frogs that called to one another across the water in single reverberating notes, as though there were a troupe of Chinese musicians hidden around the lake’s perimeter. The sky was a high and silent void swirling with stars; the trees and lake improbably still. Li and Jo took off their shoes. Luxuriating in the feel of the cool, damp sand they waded out into the shallows and tipped their heads back to admire the Milky Way. As they watched a Chinese lantern wisped its way upwards into the sky and hung there. To Li and Jo, the world seemed to revolve around the lantern’s red and purple incandescence until it drifted ever so lightly shorewards to descend, over the summer trees.

Inside Li's head the forest exploded. Dry treetops caught alight, flaming branches fell to the ground, roaring beasts of flame gorged themselves on the crackling understorey as every living creature dashed, flew or leapt away. The families in their tents and pop tops would be trapped, prevented from getting to the lake by a wall of flame.

'Fuck!' The word burst from Jo's throat and they pelted together up the path towards the campsite.

When my father was seven years old, my grandfather pushed him into the sea and told him to swim to Australia. The sky smiled serenely blue. Small white waves licked the coast. My father began to stroke.

On shore, the White women and children living in the small towns of the North West had been evacuated, except for the post mistress at Broome who famously refused to go. Even so, there was no one left to decode the flurry of messages flowing in from the Timor Sea. By 3 March 1942 the American flyboys had left and the Dutch were just passing through.

My father took his bearings from a motor lighter travelling shorewards, parallel and to the north of him. His body rolled around in the swell. Right, left, breathe. Left, right, breathe. He told himself not to look up at the shore.

An hour earlier, he'd been sitting inside a float plane off the coast, playing with his Capstan cigarette cards and two felt animals: the giraffe with her strangely long neck, and the sheep whose felted sides had been covered in a thin layer of carded wool, so that the creature tickled his hand when he held it in his palm. In truth, my father had never seen a sheep. He'd spent the last three years of his life in Java, where my grandfather served in the Dutch Naval Airforce<sup>7</sup>.

Since the fall of Singapore, my father and his older sister Ute had carried water bottles, a first aid kit, and a gas mask with them whenever they left the house. One day Oma had caught my father removing the mask to make room for his tin soldiers. She'd snapped at him then. And, when he asked her why he had to take the gas mask everywhere, she'd said: 'Vanwege de oorlog.' 'Because of the war.'

That's when my father realized that 'de oorlog' was no longer just something the adults listened to at night on the radio in the study, with the door shut, while the tjetjak lizards scurried up the wall. Plans were being made, 'vanwege de oorlog', and that's all anyone would tell him. So, my father had sat playing, with the lizards on the wall for company, while Oma went next door to give their house keys to a neighbour. That afternoon they had been driven to a sugar plantation to meet up with my grandfather and to board one of the Dutch Navy flying boats, hidden up the river.

By the time they had climbed into the plane it had been jammed with evacuating women and children. All the seats had been removed, and the guns folded away to make space for them. Oma must have stepped carefully around limbs and suitcases, guiding my father and my aunt,

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<sup>7</sup> MLD / Marineluchtvaartdienst

concentrating on finding a space large enough for them to stay together. My grandfather would have gone off to join the crew.

As my Oma tells it, the doors had closed and the plane had begun to taxi down the river. To the passengers, seated on the floor and unable to see out, it had seemed a long time before they became airborne. Perhaps the plane was too heavy, packed too full. Perhaps take off would be impossible. Babies, and toddlers picked up on the tension and began to cry. My father remembers Oma taking his hand on one side and Ute's on the other. He says it was the grip of her fingers, the force of her will that enabled that plane to lift off the water and stay airborne for the 620 miles across the Timor Sea.

They had landed, just after sunrise, in Broome's Roebuck Bay. Here they were told there'd be a long wait for a boat to shore. They were not told this at the time, but I know now that many of Broome's small craft had been strategically relocated out of the North West. If the Japanese invaded, the Australians didn't want them to find fleets of small craft available to help them make landfall.

Oma once told me that my father only looked up when the crew began opening the doors and hatches and to let in fresh air. Soon, she said, there had been small groups of people seated on the wings and floats of the plane. My father had not wanted to come outside at first, but Ute called back to him telling him that she could see a really big plane being refuelled, and a town far away in the distance.

\*\*\*

When my father was seven years old my grandfather pushed him into the sea and told him to swim to Australia. Whenever I put it like that my grandfather turns his palms to the ceiling and says I exaggerate, but in some ways that sentence is an understatement.

My father did not swim alone. The water did not stay clear and neither did the sky. A telegram lodged at Broome at 1 pm on the day my father entered the water read:

EIGHT JAP FIGHTERS BURNED AND SANK FIFTEEN FLYING BOATS HERE  
THIS MORNING [...] STOP CASUALTIES NOT YET KNOWN STOP ONLY  
AIRCRAFT ON WATER AND GROUND WERE FIRED UPON ADVISE FYSH  
IMMEDIATELY STOP<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Excerpted from *Eight Jap Fighters Burned and Sank Fifteen Flying Boats...* (1942, March 3). [Telegram decode] (Copied from the Australian War Memorial, Canberra). Battye Library of Western Australian History. (Private Archives 5123A/9).

Broome's sturdy post mistress, who watched the Japanese air raid from where she took shelter in a neighbour's garden, later gave this eye-witness account:

*It was all incredibly quick. I suppose the whole attack was over in twenty minutes. Those fighter planes tore around at a terrific speed, dived one by one on their objective, and the rat-a-tat-tat of their machine-guns was followed by an incredible display of fireworks. They used incendiary bullets like this (displays a brass cartridge case more than 2 cm in diameter). They left a trail of smoke behind them and set fire to everything they hit.*

*In a few minutes the whole harbour was covered in a pall of smoke, thick and black, through which it was impossible to observe what was going on. The waters of the harbour were soon filled, I learned afterwards, with people from damaged craft.<sup>9</sup>*

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Eventually, my father had climbed carefully out of the flying boat's hatch to stand on the wing with the others. My grandfather had come out to join them, saying that more planes should arrive soon, as they wanted to move as many of their people out of the Dutch East Indies as they could.

Ute and my father had counted the evacuation flights out loud as they arrived, and soon, with no boats available to ferry the evacuees to land, the new arrivals had begun to appear through the hatches too. They had stood on the wings of their planes, as though on the wings of giant birds, all floating gently on the bay. For a short while my father's family were at leisure to watch events unfold and to admire the beauty of 'Australie'. As new flying boats had come into land, my grandfather had pointed out which of them were likely to be captained by his colleagues, and perhaps contain people they knew. After the tension and uncertainty of the last days in Java, my father had felt a bubble of relief and happiness building inside him. When he looked across at Ute and his mother he had seen that they were smiling too.

Grandfather had not smiled. He had fixed his eyes on the horizon. The flying boats, stripped back as they were to make space for evacuees, were defenceless, and for some time he had been worried about the escalating radio traffic between Java and Broome. He feared that the Japanese, though unable to decode the messages, would work out that the extra radio traffic was due to a mass evacuation. Now, with his eyes pinned to the distance, my Grandfather thought he could make out a different kind of aircraft. When the Japanese Zeros came towards them, flying low across the water

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<sup>9</sup> Bardwell, B. (1985). Eyewitness Account of the Attack. *Historicus: The West at War*. 20(2), 21.

my grandfather knew they were in trouble. By the time the Japanese planes came in low enough for the evacuees to see their red hinomaru, my grandfather was already in action.

‘Spring! Nu!’ My grandfather barked above the scream of the Japanese engines. And he pushed my father, my aunt and my grandmother off the wing of the flying boat and into the water. The Japanese opened fire and a few moments later the plane behind them exploded.

My father gasped with shock and fought to kick off his shoes. When he resurfaced, he was under the burning wing of the float plane. Hot air blasted his face and he dove down again to frog kick away under water. Afraid that the flaming wing would break off and fall on him, my father held his breath until his lungs burned and he felt as though his chest would split open. He kicked and kicked trying to put as much space between himself and the burning wing as he could. By the time he came up again, the air was thick with smoke, and a pool of oil was widening towards him. My father again dove down and resurfaced even further out. He couldn’t see his family, and gasped for breath in the small space between the ocean’s surface and the acrid smoke boiling above him. Glimpsing the red cargo of the lighter he strove to right himself, to establish a stroke, to make a line parallel with the lighter, to head towards the shore.

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‘When my father was seven years old my grandfather pushed him into the sea and told him to swim to Australia.’ When I put it like that my father shrugs, he says he’s nothing special. That he was lucky to survive. And that I should remember his experience is not typical.

He’s right of course. Many of the Dutch who arrived in Western Australia came by boat after the war. Their adventure was six weeks at sea and a stay in the Greylands migrant hostel. But my father swam to Australia.

## Candlebrot

*'I remember the maps of the Holy Land. Coloured they were. Very pretty. The Dead Sea was pale blue. The very look of it made me thirsty. That's where we'll go for our honeymoon. We'll swim. We'll be happy.'*

*- Estragon.<sup>10</sup>*

*Thumb sketch on glass*, Lijah said out loud, as he positioned himself with his back straight against the wall, sit-bones pressed to the floor, body making a perfect 'L.' Legs. Bum. Back. He stretched his arms out wide, turned his head from side to side and re-aligned his head and neck by making figure eights in the air, with the tip of his nose. Lijah's procrastination over rewriting the score for *Candlebrot* only came to a halt when he heard the ping of his iPhone. 'Piers. Piers. Piers. Piers,' declaimed Lijah, in a rising falsetto, as he crossed the room.

'Good news! Skype me 11 pm your time tonight.'

Lijah felt something in the pit of his stomach unfurl, then close back up again, as though it were afraid to show itself. He had no way of knowing that within six months Piers would be standing beside him in Perth, a guest of the International Arts Festival, and that they would be admiring *Thumb sketch on glass* hanging on the wall.

All Lijah can see from here is that there's been a shift in Piers. Just as his work's found a new groove, his personality, on screen at least, seems amplified, burgeoning, largo. Back in the old days, when they'd been students together in a frat house, and they'd taken their own tea bags with them to save money on a trip to the Met, Lijah was the one with the first thoughts. He'd be on a roll with some painting or other for weeks, but he was never able to finish things properly. Piers could. Although his ideas arrived slowly, they were made to last.

Eventually, Piers had found a route into the New York Art scene that Lijah didn't know, or couldn't find, and so he'd changed tack. Ten years on, Lijah's made a niche for himself playing sax and specialising in composition for theatre and film. Nowadays he's the man who fell to Perth, returned to reconnect with his aging parents.

Six months ago, with Lijah's American life packed into a couple of wheel-on suitcases, the two men had stood in the Departure Lounge at JFK. Piers, never given to romanticism, or excessive theatrics (as Lijah was), had reverted to French, which he'd learned from his Vietnamese-born mother. 'Au revoir,' he'd said and kissed Lijah, softly, on the mouth.

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<sup>10</sup> Beckett, S. (1988). *Waiting for Godot*, Act I: Sc 1, p.12.



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Piers settled himself in, admiring the brand spanking new venue, and apologised to the punters on either side as he shrugged off his camera bag. Lijah seemed to think he would enjoy this and had handed over the ticket with an assurance that he was in for 'a real Australian experience,' whatever that was. Piers made a mental note to give him a call during the interval.

The lights came up on two men standing in front of a corrugated iron hut. Where there might have been windows, rough lengths of wood had been slapped on the front, as though the building had put its fingers over its eyes. At the front there was a deep veranda. A wide red road stretched away behind the scene and in the distance was an impressively high and rocky looking ridge. The foreground was dominated by a tree with a fat belly, a bottle-like neck and a surfeit of arm-like branches that stretched up into a wide blue sky. Piers recognised the tree immediately as a Boab because he and Lijah had taken a selfie underneath one in King's Park only yesterday. The men onstage were dressed, surprisingly respectably for the setting in suit pants, white shirts, and hats in a style that was fashionable on the continent in the 1930s. The smaller of the two men sat down on the step suddenly, 'It's no use. I'll have to take them off.'

Now that he was sitting down it looked as if the small man might stay there. The shoes in question were serviceable black leather ones, not the work boots you might expect in such a setting. And the man's voice reminded Piers of the older Jewish men he's photographed in New York.

'Oy', the small man said, rocking backwards slightly, so as to lift his feet into the air. 'Oy,' he slapped at his shoes, 'Oy, oy, oy,' he tore at his feet and ankles with his hands.

The larger of the two men looked down at his companion from the veranda with a resigned air. 'Go on then. Get it over with.'

'As if we could.'

'Could what?'

'Have it over with. Skip to the end of the story.'

'At least we're together.'

The small man took off his left shoe and shook his sock vigorously in the air, stopping now and then to smooth it flat and pick at it with a thumb and forefinger.

'Help me can't you.'

The tall man came down to the same level as his companion, took the offended foot gently in his hand and turned it this way and that.

'There's nothing to see,' he declared, firmly.

'Not now.'

'What do you mean?'

'They're gone.'

'Who?'

'Everyone.'

'Not everyone.'

'Some.'

'Your family.'

'Yes.'

'Is that what you meant?'

'When?'

'Just now.'

'No.'

'Well.'

'Well, what?'

'What did you mean?'

'Ants.'

'Ants?'

'Insects.'

'But they're gone now.'

'Yes.'

'Then put your shoe back on.'

Piers smiled to himself; he's read Bill Bryson, knows that there are thirteen hundred species of ant in Australia. Just that morning, at Lijah's Highgate flat, he had marvelled at a string of them long marching the laundry lino; hoisting cake crumbs and Weet-Bix, carrying off the wings of moths, like builders hefting sheets of wallboard. Was this what Lijah had meant when he'd told Piers he was in for a 'real Australian story'? Red dirt landscape. Big sky. Boab tree. Ants. It was almost a check list. If anything, Piers felt, their six months apart had only deepened Lijah's sense of the ironic.

By the time Piers returned his concentration to the stage, the two men were arguing in a Beckettian fashion about whether or not they could move on. The small man seemed keen to leave.

'Shall we go?'

'No.'

'Why not?'

'Because we must wait for Yitzak.'

'Here?'

'What?'

‘Are we to wait here?’

‘He said to wait at the house with the tree. Do you see any others?’

‘What sort is it?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘Will he come today?’

‘He said for Shabbos.’

‘Are you sure?’ asked the small man.

‘Yitzak moik a shabbos,’ shrugged the taller man, looking at the sky, as though to determine the position of the sun.

‘Then he’ll be here.’

‘Perhaps.’

‘Of course.’ The small man scratched at his foot again before sitting back. ‘And when Yitzak comes?’

‘I beg your pardon?’

‘What happens when Yitzak comes?’

‘That depends on circumstances.’

‘Politics.’

‘Politicians.’

‘Unions.’

‘The Minister of the Interior.’

‘The Minister of Agriculture.’

‘The Bishops. The Catholics.’

‘The Protestants.’

‘The Jews,’ the tall man finished glumly. ‘It could be worse.’

‘How worse?’

‘We might have been detained.’

‘We might.’

‘But we’re free.’

‘Free to wait.’

‘In a new country it is never a good idea to be in a hurry.’

The men on stage sat down together on the steps, each leaning against a fragile looking veranda post.

‘I could tell a joke,’ suggested the small man.

‘Go on then.’

‘A Catholic, a Protestant and a Jew walk into a bar...’

‘What happened?’

‘They became friends.’

‘Is that all?’

‘That’s all. That’s what happens if no one is a schlemiel.’

‘The world today is full of schlemiels.’

(Silence)

‘I should put the challah in the oven.’

‘Go on then. Have we got wine?’

‘Of course.’

‘Candles?’

‘Yes.’

‘That puts me in mind of something.’

‘What?’

‘My daughter. We are teaching her English.’

‘For Australia?’

The tall man shrugs. ‘England, America...’

‘And?’

‘She loves making up words.’

‘For instance?’

‘Would you stop interrupting.’

‘I wasn’t.’

‘Yes you were.’

‘No, I—’

‘There you go again. I’ve lost my train of thought.’ There is a silence, in which the small man comes back to his companion and sits down. ‘Yoshi?’

‘Mmm?’

‘What did your daughter say?’

‘Candlebrot.’

‘Candlebrot?’

‘Exactly. Half English. Half German.’ The small man got up and went inside, leaving the taller man alone on stage. An Aboriginal man dressed in a long sleeve shirt, worn trousers and short riding boots entered from the wings. He was wearing what looked like a battered cowboy hat. He seemed surprised to find someone already there.

‘G’day Kartija.’

‘Good day.’

‘What are you doing here?’

‘We are not from these parts, sir.’

‘We are only waiting for Yitzak,’ said the small man rejoining his companion.

‘Yes. Yitzak, I mean, Steinberg,’ offered the tall man, obviously hoping that Steinberg’s name might be known to the visitor.

‘Steinberg?’

‘Isaac Nachman Steinberg,’ the tall man spoke slowly.

‘The Territorialist,’ said the small man.

‘The Terrorist?’

‘No. Isaac Nachman Steinberg. The Territorialist. He wants to bring some people here. Settlers.

‘Here?’

‘We don’t intend any harm only—’

‘We need a place to go.’

‘Somewhere empty.’

‘With a tolerable climate.’

‘A democratic government.’

‘Plenty of land.’

The Aboriginal man looked askance at the audience but said nothing more to his visitors. Instead he picked up a boab nut. ‘You know what to do with one of these?’ he asked, tossing it at the two men. To give him credit, thought Piers, the tall man intercepted the unexpected pass pretty well. ‘No sir.’

‘What is it?’ said the small man.

‘Goomboon. With fibre from that tree we make thick rope strong enough to hold canoes. The rains come and water collects there.’ He indicated the tree’s branches. ‘Inside this nut—from that we make good drink. Very good. You got a tree like this in your country?’

‘No sir,’ said the tall man.

‘So Kartija. You want to come live here.’

‘Shall I give him one of these?’ asked the small man, turning to the tall man and putting his hand into his front trouser pocket.

‘One of what?’ asked the tall man.

‘A chestnut.’

‘What?’

‘A chestnut.’ The small man pulled his hand out with a bit of a yank and showed both men a small wooden nut with a shine to it, like antique furniture. It looked puny beside the large downy shape of the boab nut.

‘What do you do with them?’ asked the Aboriginal man.

‘What do you mean?’ asked the small man.

‘Can you eat them?’

‘No.’

‘Not even cooked?’

‘No.’

‘Do you trade them?’

‘No.’

‘What happens if you burn them?’

‘I don’t know. I never did.’

‘You can play games with them,’ said the tall man. ‘With string.’ The two men mime briefly the action of playing conkers.

‘I had a forty-niner once,’ said the small man. ‘Baked it in the oven ever so gently to harden it up.’

‘But not too much.’

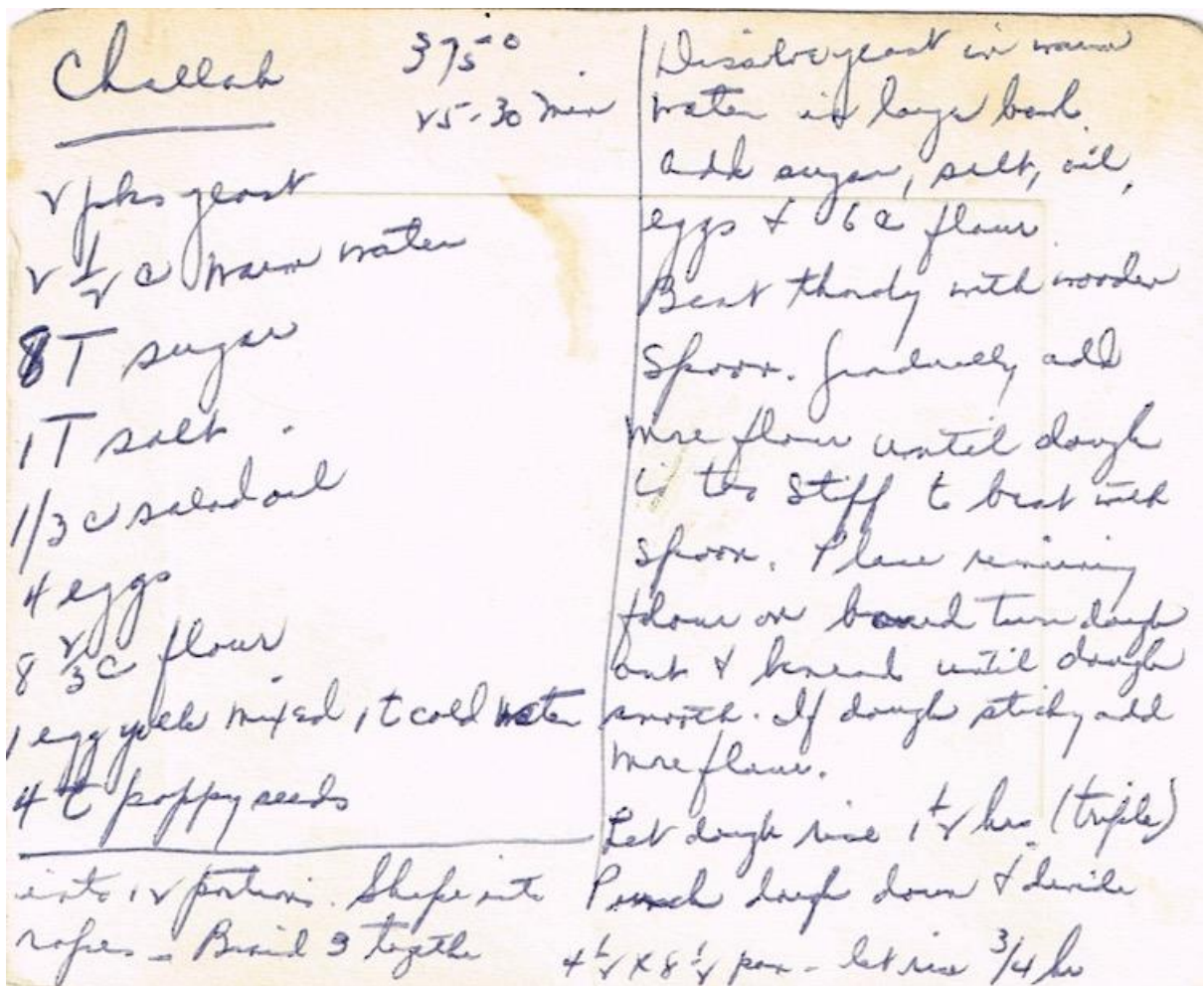
The Aboriginal man holds the chestnut, still warm from the small man’s pocket, and the three men look down at it in silence. ‘It’s not good for building you know’ says the Aboriginal man thoughtfully. ‘Goomboon. It’s fibres all the way through. No wood. You must never harm this tree Kartija. Burn this tree and you will be burnt. It makes you all light. All your body get light and you float away. Soft Kartija. Like ashes.’<sup>11</sup>

Piers was startled to discover, not only that it was interval, but that he wanted to stay in his seat. He now recognised the play as a version of *Waiting for Godot*, which he had studied in college. Thoroughly intrigued, Piers went out to phone his friend, but Lijah was playing sax for a gig at the Blue Room and had turned off his phone.

As Piers re-entered the auditorium he was met by the smell of bread baking and an usher handed him a warm slice of soft, sweet bread, wrapped in a hand written recipe.

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<sup>11</sup> This passage concerning the Boab tree (Goomboon), and the previous one, have been modelled on an oral account given to Pat Lowe by Mary Pandilo (Gwini tribe/Gunin language) and published in Lowe (1998) *Boab: The Boab Tree*, pp. 46-48.



Challah is the egg-rich, braided bread served on Shabbos. Two loaves are customarily set on the Friday night table under an open napkin or challah cloth. Challah is a symbol of love, so much so that some Jewish families gently tear the loaves into servings with their hands rather than use a knife.<sup>12</sup>

On stage, the sun was setting and the Boab tree seemed to come alive as the shadows lengthened. A young man, dressed in a long sleeved white shirt and big black hat appeared before the hut. There was, Piers thought, something transparent about him, as though he were a hologram of himself, or an angel. It was absurd that he should arrive at all of course, and when he spoke it was with a boy's voice, a voice that had not yet broken—

‘Steinberg won’t come this week.’

‘No?’ asked the tall man.

<sup>12</sup> This handwritten recipe was found at [www.jessiesheehanbakes.com](http://www.jessiesheehanbakes.com). Repeated attempts to contact Jessie Sheehan for permission have been unsuccessful.

The explanation beneath the recipe was developed from material in Roden, C. (1997). *The Book of Jewish Food An Odyssey from Samarkand and Vilna to the Present Day*, pp. 85-87.

'Next week?' asked the small man.

'Yes.'

'What's he doing?'

'Mr Steinberg?' The young man looked from one to the other. 'The same as you.'

'The same as us?'

'Waiting.' He indicated the table set up on the veranda. 'Making Shabbos.'

'Go check the challah,' said the tall man suddenly.

The small man excused himself and went quickly to the hut. The heavy wooden door was difficult to open and the small man left it ajar as he strode inside. The tall man took the boy by his elbow, and moved him a little further down stage.

'Is there some problem?'

'No, no. I mean yes.'

'Well, which is it? Yes or no?'

'Yes and no.'

'Are you a rabbi?'

'No. Only a yeshiva student.'

'Here? In the Kimberley?'

'In Melbourne.'

'Do you think Steinberg can do it?'

'Do it?'

'Arrange for us to stay.'

The small man came back outside and listened intently from the veranda as he prepared the table for Shabbos, with a white cloth, challah, wine and candle sticks.

'That depends.'

'Don't say that...'

'Permissions are hard to get just now.'

'What do you mean?'

'The St Louis.'

(Silence).

Clearly the tall man does not understand this reference. A voice came from the small man on the veranda -

'The ship from Hamburg. Built in Bremen.'

'What ship?' asked the tall man.

'The passengers are ours. Yidden.' answered the boy.

'Nu?'



‘They’ve not been allowed to land in Cuba,’ said the boy quietly.

‘I don’t understand,’ said the small man, moving forward and off the veranda.

‘Cuba has closed off immigration to everyone but Americans.’

‘But they have visas,’ broke in the small man. It was a statement not a question.

‘They did.’

‘What do you mean? Did?’ demanded the tall man.

‘They purchased visas before they left Germany but now they’re useless. They’re not allowed to land.’

‘Why not?’ asked the small man.

‘He just told you. Because they don’t have visas,’ said the tall man.

‘But they do have visas.’

‘Not the right visas.’

‘I don’t understand.’

‘Let me explain it to you,’ said the young man, kindly. ‘When they left Germany they had purchased legal visas but now the visas are not legal.’

‘How can you buy a legal visa that’s illegal?’

‘You don’t,’ said the tall man. ‘You buy a legal visa that becomes an illegal visa.’

The small man looked perplexed. His companion tried again to explain: ‘Like the Deutschmark. One minute you have a fortune, the next you have only a wheelbarrow full of paper.’

‘I put a loaf of bread in the oven and take out a stone.’

‘Correct.’ The young man nodded.

‘Maybe Australia will take them,’ said the tall man.

‘That would be a start,’ said the small man.

‘Not yet,’ said the young man.

‘Why this ‘not yet.’ What are they waiting for?’

‘Shh!’

‘Don’t ‘shh’ me. Where is your brother?’

‘Let’s not bring my brother into this.’

‘Are you mad? Your brother has been detained. Who knows where he is...even if he is still alive, maybe he isn’t.’

‘Stop it. Stop it.’ The small man broke off and moved down stage. There was silence for a moment before the tall man looked up at the sky.

‘Chavrutay nevarech...’

The tall man and the short man went to the veranda and put on their prayer shawls. All three men began to chant quietly before breaking into song. As the singing continued, a backing track—

Lijah's saxophone and strings—augmented the overall sound which was laid over the deep vibrations of a didgeridoo. During the song the boy faded away and two women crossed the veranda lighting and blessing the Shabbos candles before leaving the stage on the opposite side.

Once the stage had emptied the tall man and the small man took a seat each at the table, where they made a blessing over the wine, and washed their hands in a ritual fashion, before blessing and breaking the Shabbos loaves.

'Good Shabbos. Enjoy your challah,' said the small man. 'That's the last of the flour.'

'Could you build a boat?' asked the tall man thoughtfully.

'I couldn't. Could you?'

'Maybe.'

The two men looked out into the darkness of the auditorium as if their eyes might accustom themselves to the poor light and identify a ready supply of tall straight trees growing somewhere between them and the horizon. The lights began to fade over the stage; the Shabbos candles continued to burn down; and just before it was completely dark a host of tiny bats unfurled from the Boab tree to fly once around the auditorium and away into the big sky. Naturally there were those in the audience who felt the need to scream. Pity, thought Piers, he had enjoyed the effect and joined enthusiastically in the applause before moving quickly toward the exit.

Lijah was waiting for him at the foot of the stairs. He'd let his long black hair down, and had swept it over to one side so that the wire connecting his iPhone to his ear was not visible. It took Piers a moment to realize that Lijah was all wired up and moving in time to an invisible music of his own, oblivious to the swirl of post-show talk around them.

'Hey,' Lijah said, putting up a hand for Piers, as he came up. 'How was it?'

'Interesting. Who did the music?'

'Funny guy.' Lijah grinned before pulling Piers into a hug. Piers stood back, shaking his head. 'What's the matter?'

'It's good to be here.'

'I don't understand why you told me I would find it 'Australian',' said Piers once they were seated in an air-conditioned restaurant facing down super-size bowls of Mee-Goreng.

'What do you think I meant?' Lijah waved his chop sticks in a way that Piers's grandmother would have found rude, so he answered Lijah's question with one of his own.

'What do you think Perth would have been like if they'd let Jews settle the Kimberley?'

'Melbourne with better beaches,' Lijah answered, dead pan. Piers has never been to Melbourne but he laughed for the pleasure of Lijah's company.

'I met an Aboriginal guy once with Hebrew tattoos,' Lijah resumed.

‘What was that about?’

‘Dunno. Not my business to ask him where he’s from. Maybe he had a Jewish ancestor. Look at me, half-Chinese, half-Indonesian, half-Jewish, Lijah raised his porcelain soup spoon to gesture at the room, ‘and raised in Perth.’

‘That’s too many halves Lijah.’

‘Whatever. Australia’s a moosh up. You know? I don’t stand out.’

‘Yeah. You seem pretty settled.’

Lijah shrugged, ‘It’s where I grew up. The smell, the light. And I can get NYPR anywhere in the world now.’

Piers smiled at Lijah with his eyes over the rim of his bowl and shovelled up the last of his noodles without speaking.

Lijah grinned. ‘You should try it.’

‘What?’

‘Living in Perth.’

Piers set his bowl down gently and placed his chopsticks carefully across it. ‘Do you ever buy lotto tickets?’

‘Sometimes,’ said Lijah.

‘Does your outlet have a God of Prosperity on the counter?’ Piers persisted, reaching for the container of toothpicks that sat between the chilli and the soy.

‘Mmm.’

‘And do you stick a five-cent coin to him for luck when you buy your ticket?’

‘Where’s this headed?’

‘Just answer the question.’

‘No.’

‘Neither do I. But my grandmother—’

Lijah laughed. ‘I know. I know.’

Piers and Lijah walked out of the restaurant and turned towards Highgate. The waitress cleared their bowls away and gave the table a perfunctory wipe with a blue and white cloth. The Jewish actors hung up their white shirts, their suit pants and their 1930s hats, and went home without eating the challah because, as any thespian will tell you, one should never eat props. The Aboriginal actor laughed at the Jews and their thespian superstition, and tucked the challah under his arm for his kids, who, since they’d seen the show, have kept asking him to bring home the candle-bread. Inside the darkened auditorium, the Boab tree stretched its arm-like branches up into the big sky, unfurled a thousand new green leaves and produced just one flower which opened perfectly, palely, yellow.

## Waking

Azmal lies on his side considering one memory at a time, recalling every detail, projecting each one like a television image on to the inside of his closed eyelids. The soft bodies, the busy wings of bees. The hard nub of a kid goat's horn under his fingers. The orchard—the clusters of fruit ripening, like gems among the green leaves; the quick sharp taste of apricots. He remembers standing in the cool air of the beekeeper's house, watching thick honey flow from a tap into the square tin he'd brought with him. Azmal can still feel the fierce heat of the sun on the back of his legs, as he carried the tin outside.

He recalls his mother's face. And Sonita, his betrothed. His girl with her beautiful eyes, and her skinny brothers Fahim and Muzafar, whom everyone had thought too young to be taken.

A woman with spectacles like coins had visited them in Jakarta. Fahim, who never would have done a woman's work in Afghanistan, was making bread, cooking the pieces one at a time on their small stove. That's what the woman saw; eight lives crammed into a small house. Eight men waiting for a boat. She had come with a translator and a camera, to record their stories.

Azmal thinks of this remembering as his own kind of recording work. It's a way to hold on to his past; these details, which he remembers, belong to him. No one can take them away. Besides it's something he can do to make the day run faster, better than listening to his heart which is full of fear... He re-imagines Hazarajat; a place without guns. No rockets, no hiding in cellars, no orphans, no dead father or grandfather...a world that doesn't exist anymore. A country that was taken from him, even before he had to leave it.

The woman with spectacles like coins did not look like the women and girls he knew. She was Australian, her skin was pale, and her hair was a reddish blonde. Although she wore a head scarf, she didn't seem embarrassed or shy when the fabric of her head covering fell sideways. She just kept on with the interview, asking questions, listening to Fahim's answers. Afterwards, she asked the men if they had any questions for her. Of course, Fahim wanted to know if she was married. She told them no, she was not married and did not have any children. Azmal had wondered about her family then. What kind of people would let their daughter roam about the world, with no one to look out for her? Now that Azmal has arrived in her country, he wonders if he will meet her again. Were the guards and the Department of Immigration officials he had met here most like the kind of people he would meet in Australia? Or was the woman with spectacles like coins a better example?

Azmal knows now that the boys were not too young to be taken. News reached him yesterday. The Taliban had taken them, just as they had taken so many others; Rashid and Muzafar had been whipped, imprisoned and shot.

Azmal opens his eyes. He has no choice as to what he will look at. Here there is only the walls of the detention centre room that he shares with the others, and his plastic container of toiletries hanging down. He sits up. He stills himself on the edge of his allocated bed, considers his feet and legs, his body, his sturdy hands with their squared off fingers.

The woman with spectacles like coins had told them she did not know whether her film would make a difference, and that she had no involvement in deciding how many, or whether they could get into Australia. Still, Azmal thinks of her this morning. He imagines her returning to them with good news, her eyes alight with recognition and kindness.

Azmal's mouth opens in a grimace, his shoulders drop forward. He puts his face in his hands, and lets the tears come.

## Beginnings

1.

If there were a portrait of Eva, Kathleen O'Connor might have painted it, and Eva might have been preserved, forever tending lamps or ironing. But the image I most want to show you would never have been recorded. Who would have known, had she lived, that Eva was a soap carver? Who would have thought, or cared enough about it, to paint her as she patiently whittled and slivered and smoothed?

If such a painting existed would it have found a patron, or would it have been turned regretfully to the wall, painted over and resold, the blank canvas repurposed by McCubbin to depict a slump shouldered man, down on his luck?

Had the painting survived, Eva would have been depicted in a subdued palette: greys and browns, with a few red and purple highlights. The window beside her would, no doubt, have been stood open. Generations of art historians would have later noted this. They would have read the open window as a reference to Eva's domestic role and remarked on the painting's interiority. They would have read the open window as a gesture to the existence of an outside world, a world of men, in which she, Eva, could only ever play a supporting role.

Why would it have been beyond them to imagine that, had she survived the heat of summer and her appalling start in the colony, Eva, albeit a working-class girl, might have had a creative impulse of her own? Perhaps Eva enjoyed the famous Australian light, as so many other artists did, and opened the window so as to harness that very light for her own, creative purposes.

2.

Jo was studying history when the Berlin wall came down, like a song. Her class was shifted to the basement lecture theatre that morning and when the lecturer opened a drawer to look for a whiteboard marker and said, like a show man: 'Only a pair of left-handed scissors,' everyone laughed. They could not bring themselves to settle studiously down. History students were suddenly hip. They'd been delivered a post-script to the Cold War: 'The wall is coming down', like a song.

They surged up the stairs afterwards, the history students, feeling themselves to be at one with the youth of East and West Berlin. They were carried away by Glasnost, far away from the specificities of their own Western Australian, edge-of-the-world, post-war past. As she came up the basement stairs that morning, Jo felt that a ribbon had been cut in two with a pair of shining scissors. Her future had been declared open. Her generation would be truly post-war, post-modern, post-history, post-everything.

3.

The girls sat in a circle with sheets of newspaper strewn on the linoleum floor between them. Each held a terracotta pot and, with regulation school paint brushes two sizes too big for the job, was decorating her pot with varying degrees of good humour.

‘Something from each of you,’ the teacher had said, standing in front of a row of seedling olive trees.

Zahra supposed she meant something Jewish, something Christian and something from Islam. Stalling for time she painted a border in yellow around the edge. It was her sister who wore hijab, her mother who queued at the halal butcher, and her brothers who fasted for Ramadan. So far she’d managed to attend school in a version of the school uniform accessorized with retro platform shoes, rather than a head scarf.

The girls on either side of her, Estrella, a Chilean girl and Juliet, who’d arrived in Perth from New Zealand in time for Year Three, had been her friends since primary school, yet here they all were in a day-long specialist program designed to foster inter-cultural awareness, busily selecting ethnically diverse peace symbols: Estrella was painting a star of David, and Juliet was painting a dove.

‘We’ll be planting olive trees in these pots after lunch,’ came the teacher’s voice. ‘Hurry and finish now please.’ Quickly Zahra painted a purple peace sign onto the terracotta.

‘John Lennon,’ said Juliet.

‘Wish he were here!’ Zahra grinned.

4.

There are no photographs of Azmal before he arrived in Australia, because no one in the rural areas of Afghanistan where Azmal lived as a child owned a camera. Besides which Azmal is a composite character. I made him up.

I looked for a man like Azmal in Eva Orner’s documentary about the Pacific Solution and in grainy television footage. I looked for him in The Mixing Room at Te Papa where refugees tell their own stories. I looked for him in the face of Abbas Nazari who survived the Tampa ordeal and went on to study at Columbia on a Fulbright Scholarship, and who happened to be one of the first on the scene on the day of the Christchurch Mosque attacks. I looked for Azmal in all the images I could find of the Hazara men who have come to Australia and New Zealand since the 1990s.

Do not think for one moment that I scanned the newspaper photographs with my heart in my eyes, or slowed down the television coverage, playing it back again and again, praying to find the face of someone that I hoped, against all the odds, might still be alive. No. I was merely compiling writerly detail, looking for clues to a character of my own invention.

It's no use being squeamish. Writers come after the action. We pick over the leavings, like hawks landed on road kill.

5.

Phuong looked straight ahead. Her bus would stop twice more on Alexander Drive before it became the express to Mirrabooka Bus Station.

'Good afternoon.' A tall, denim-clad figure in a newly pressed work shirt, and an Akubra boarded the bus. 'Like Crocodile Dundee,' thought Phuong, ducking her head.

'How are you?' The man in the Akubra hat addressed his new seat mate, an Asian man sitting several rows ahead of Phuong.

No answer.

'Are you Chinese or Japanese?'

Phuong took a deep breath and let it out slowly. She was glad she'd left her bag on the seat beside her. The man in the Akubra hat wasn't about to give up.

'Are you from China or Japan?'

The bus had gone silent now, so that the voice of the man in the Akubra hat seemed to blow up like bubble gum, to stretch, and stretch until it filled the bus, crowding out bags, and newspapers and umbrellas and shopping, and even the passengers, especially passengers who looked different, like Phuong and the silent man. Phuong felt as if that voice might stretch over at any moment and burst against her face when—

'Malaysia,' he said. 'I'm from Malaysia.'

'Oh. Malaysia. I was wrong.'

Phuong noticed the way the man in the Akubra hat said that, big and loud and sure of himself, as though he hadn't admitted to being wrong at all. She rested her hot face against the window glass, while the bus waited at the lights. While Phuong was pretending to be very interested in the oncoming traffic, a butterfly flickered and dropped to rest on the outside of her window. Its wings opened and closed gently while the bus thrummed away beneath them.

The man from Malaysia began to speak again. Phuong felt herself drawing forward to listen. The other passengers drew forward too.

'And you. You are Australian. Always from here.'

The bus was moving quickly now. The butterfly had taken off. Phuong strained to hear what the man in the Akubra hat would say next.

'No. I'm Dutch, from Holland. I've been here sixty-four years, came in 1952.'



Rubibi

Mid-day, the air drips with humidity. Beside the lukewarm pool, travellers drape themselves over rattan furniture while the ceiling fans resuscitate the air, moving it in circles. Behind the window of the empty restaurant, Angela turns off her phone and picks up her streaming water glass. She's been in Broome almost a week, taking in the Pindan cliffs, the azure sea, the vast expanse of Cable Beach, but she's no closer to finding out who rescued her father than she was before she left Holland.

Her father has always claimed that it was an Indigenous man who swam him to safety and an Indigenous man who leaned down from the lighter and lifted him up. Angela knows from her online research that, although the White population of Broome had been evacuated, everyone else remained in the North West. She has read of several Indigenous men who were involved in the wartime rescues: Charlie D'Antoine, Robyn Hunter, Jerry Jardin, Paddy Torres, Joe Djanjari and, among the different eyewitness accounts given by Mrs Beresford between 1942 and her death in 1972, she has found references to three other local people who helped her on the day. But Mrs Beresford only refers to them as Gladys, Charlie and Pilate. So... there were locals there on the day but their full names have never been recorded. After all, there were no reporters there to take notes, or to record names in the heat of the moment—and even if there had been, war time censorship would have prevented those stories being published.

Angela runs through what she does know; the men and women left in Broome were not considered White, so they would have grown up living by the seasons and the tides in houses on stilts below the high tide mark, since only White Australians were entitled to buy land in the town itself. Others might have stayed at Kennedy Camp, an area outside town reserved for 'Native' use. The man who rescued her father would almost certainly have gone to school with the Sisters of Saint John of God, either at their convent school in Broome or at Beagle Bay Mission, since 'Native' and 'Mixed Race' children were not permitted to use the government schools. Most likely he would have left school early to learn ship building, to take a job in the pearling industry, or to work as stockman. With the advent of war he and his friends might have signed up. Perhaps he was only in Broome on 3 March 1942 because he was waiting to be deployed?

Angela's trip has given her a real sense of the vibrancy of the Old Broome community but she can also see that it was riven by government regulation. Aside from being excluded from government schools; barred from purchasing land above the high tide mark; and having their families fragmented by Neville's Native Welfare policy, Angela has been shocked to discover that Indigenous people could not vote, or even marry without permission in 1942. Knowing all this,

Angela was not surprised to find photographs of more than twenty of the Dutch refugees exhibited at the Broome Historical Society Museum, but not a single image of the Indigenous people who might have saved her father.

This afternoon she has at least made a recording of what she knows from her father's side, combined with the Post and Telegraph sources she found in Perth. Tomorrow she will take a break from archival research to do the mangrove walk.

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'Here. Put these on,' says Guy, pulling a small pair of neoprene booties out from a round plastic tub in the back of his ute. 'It'll be muddy.'

'Thanks.' Angela is grateful to see that she's the only one on this morning's tour. She thinks this will give her a chance to ask Guy a few extra questions, but he sets off quickly into the mangroves and, for the first half hour, Angela is completely taken over by the strangeness of the place, its salt and vegetable smell, its mud and slippage. In the roughest places, each foot must be committed to the thick grey mud, and then forcibly withdrawn. There is sucking and noise, water trickles and pops on every side, and she has to concentrate so as to avoid the looping roots of the mangroves. The multiplicity of their trunks and branches fill her field of vision with curves and intertwinings.

'There are two sorts of mangroves,' says Guy. 'Grey ones and red ones. It's the red ones that have those incredible roots—just a minute.'

Three times on their walk Guy stops like this to thrust a long wire deep into a mud crab hole. Juvenile mud crabs with their yellow front claws are everywhere but it's a full-size orange one that Guy wants to take home for dinner.

'Nah, not this time,' Guy says, stepping back and beginning to speak quickly as he walks.

'There's a lot of language work happening up here at the moment which points to Broome's being multi-cultural even before there was a word for it. People came here from all over South East Asia. So there's this word 'omang omang' which is a type of crab. We've always taken that to be a local word, if not a word belonging to Yawuru, a word belonging to some other Indigenous group...but turns out it's Filipino. People came to Broome from all over to work on the pearling boats.'

Once out on the mud flats the full force of the sun beats down, and glares up at them from the surface. Angela finds herself wishing she hadn't broken her sunglasses yesterday. The tide's out so they walk all the way across to Buccaneer Rock and Guy tells Angela the story of Rudigunya, the giant lizard-serpent who waited so long for his mermaid daughter that he turned to stone.

‘Catch a whiff,’ says Guy, gesturing to a dead seagull abandoned by the tide at the edge of the rock. ‘You don’t want to stick around here too long. The sharks’ll come for that.’

Angela is quick to agree that it’s time to turn inland and, as they cross back over the mudflat, she tells Guy how her father died recently, and how she’s come to Broome to find out more about the man who rescued him. Guy listens carefully and then—

‘We don’t go in for single heroes much.’

‘Is that why there are no pictures of local people in the display at the Museum?’

Guy seems to ignore her question and points ahead of them. ‘You see that high dune? That’s an ancient midden—you don’t see that type of shellfish here anymore—but we still like to go up there. I’ve heard older people say that’s where their dad or uncle was on the day of the bombing. I’ve also heard them say that as soon as they realised what was happening they rushed to Roebuck Bay and the aerodrome to see what help was needed. Those Dutch women and children were taken in by the community in the days before the bombing, for the short time they were here. Sometimes they needed a meal or two. There’s oral history tapes at the library...perhaps Ellen Puertollano...she recalls Dutch children having afternoon tea at her grandmother’s or her aunt’s place around that time. And Charla Clements is on tape too.’

‘Thank you,’ Angela says. ‘I’ll look into that.’ Inwardly she wonders how she’ll fit everything in before her flight home. She should have started with this walk, not left it to her second last day.

Just then Guy picks up a stone and starts knocking at an encrusted grey mass on the edge of an ordinary looking rock. He lifts off a shell and hands it to her,

‘Do you eat oysters?’

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Angela goes straight to Chinatown in search of a pharmacy after she leaves the mangroves. Even a cheap pair of sunglasses would be better than going without for the rest of the trip, she thinks, as she parks herself in front of the rotating display. She is lifting one pair off at a time to try them out when a guy reaches across from behind her. He takes the last pair of fake Ray-bans.

‘Sick’, he says out loud before going to the counter.

Angela follows him and she finds herself admiring the lizard tattoo on the side of his left leg as she waits to make her purchase. The pharmacist is avuncular, ‘Where are you working today Gazza?’

‘The lookout site.’

‘Kennedy Hill?’

‘Yup’

‘Been a bit of a ruckus about that.’

‘None of my business.’

‘You want me to cut the label off these?’

‘That’d be good.’

‘Don’t know as we need such a fancy footpath myself,’ says the pharmacist as he snips the label off.

‘Go on. The tourists are gonna love it,’ Gazza grins as he takes the glasses and slips them on. ‘Fuck knows we need the work.’

‘Too right.’

‘Ta mate. Have a good day.’

Angela’s pleased to take her turn at the counter and immediately asks the pharmacist about the tourist look-out. He looks at her intently and says, ‘Oh, there’s a lot of work planned along the waterfront to improve viewing opportunities for next tourist season.’

‘On the Jetty to Jetty trail?’

‘You’ve had a good look around then.’

‘It’s beautiful here,’ says Angela.

‘Watch the Kimberley doesn’t steal your heart.’

‘It won’t.’

‘I came here on holiday thirty years ago and never left.’

Angela laughs. ‘Is Kennedy Hill that high dune that backs onto the midden you can see from the ocean side?’

‘That’s it.’

‘Oh.’ Angela thinks quickly but keeps her voice casual. ‘The corroboree site?’

‘Not anymore.’

Angela gets the feeling the pharmacist is holding back, ‘What do you mean?’

‘I mean that a lot of people from the smaller areas have been coming into town and they squat there.’

‘Homeless?’

‘Yeah. It’s rife up here but the money’s all going into tourism. If you’d been here seven or eight months ago you could’ve looked down from the bus and seen it for yourself. There’s been a whole community removed.’

‘So where’d those people go?’

‘Good question. Just the glasses then?’

‘Yes thanks.’

‘Enjoy your stay.’

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That evening, back at the hotel, Angela slides *Putuparri and the Rainmakers* into the DVD player in her room and tucks into a slab of frittata she’s bought at the IGA. She’s frustrated that the oral history tapes she needed weren’t available this afternoon, and she hadn’t felt exactly compensated when the librarian, in her tidy uniform, recommended she take this documentary in the meantime. As Angela watches the caravan of utes loaded up with bed rolls and supplies head into The Great Sandy Desert in search of old man Spider’s mythical Kurtal, she spits a couple of olive stones onto her plate. Ninety-seven minutes later she’s picking her jaw up off the floor.

What she sees in the documentary is compelling evidence of a living relationship between a people and their land. Traversing ten years in the life of Tom Putuparri Lawford, the film makes it clear that the stories of the Dreamtime are not just stories but part of a continuing rainmaking tradition. When she sees the old men directing the drivers without maps into what looks like empty desert, explaining things to Putuparri as they go, she recalls her walk that morning—the easy way Guy navigated the mangroves, his poise and confidence there, the way he knew exactly where to look for mud crab, where to watch for sharks, where to collect oysters...By the time Spider gets out to inspect a damp patch of sand and assures the group that this is the place, Angela is intrigued.

Following directions from the two old men, the younger men begin to dig. They strike water almost straight away. The digging continues until they have created a sizable pool, and they stand back to admire their work only as birds begin flying in for a drink. Angela feels that she’s been given a window into a completely different world; the documentary has shown her how the return and activity of the tribe awakens country.

Later, when the rainmakers sing and chant, creating enormous rain clouds, tears gather in the corners of her eyes. How is it possible, she thinks, that all this—this deep, ancient knowledge has been dismissed? As the rain comes pouring down on screen, a cyclone hits Broome, clearing the streets, ripping palm fronds off trees, and hurling sheets of rain against the motel windows.

Angela is unnerved and turns away from the DVD to switch her computer on. The blue screen with its tool bar and rulers comforts her. She sets about transcribing an eyewitness account of the bombing that she found yesterday in the vertical file at the Museum. The piece is signed only ‘Xav,’ dated 1944, and appears to have been published in a book of war writings produced out of the War Museum in Canberra. It has been so copied and recopied that it is barely legible, even in the enlarged photocopy she has made on the Museum’s antiquated machine:

*Inside the flying boat I could hear a baby crying and against the windows I could see the faces of half a dozen children, noses flat against the glass restless with curiosity [...] The lighter bumped with the tide against the side of the flying boat and we waited for her to settle down before we slung the fuel-pipe across. The mechanic took it and made the connection.*

*He flashed a grin and said something in Dutch.*

*'O.K,' I said, and let the fuel run. Harry stood beside me, smiling at the kids. 'I've been talking to these Dutchmen for the last week and they've been talking back at me and so far the only understanding we've had is "Good day." I've said "Good day" to everything they've asked me. They must think I'm the local half-wit [...]' 'I wonder how much longer these refugees'll be arriving. There can't be many more left in Java [...].*

*The planes came on in, flying low, the sound of them hurling itself at you with a roar that was almost a physical blow, making you want to run only there was nowhere to run to and there were women screaming and Harry swearing loud and blasphemously.*

*The first two planes went over, so low and so fast they seemed shapeless and shadowless, just a swift ear-shattering dark rush of wind and then I saw the white columns magically appearing in the water coming with such terrific speed towards us.*

*'Down!'*

*We dived flat and as I hit the deck between two oil drums I thought, clear against the shock in my mind. 'What a hell of a place to dive for safety!'*

*The bullets chopped the end of the lighter, splintering wood and ricocheting off the ironwork with a horrible short-lived sound and then I heard the roar again...I rolled on my back and saw the last four planes go over, streaks against the sky, and from the boat beside us flame was shooting in angry eruption. The Dutch mechanic was gone from the top of the hull and now the faces at the window were contorted with panic, terror-stricken fingers clawing at the glass and the crying of the baby was lost in the screams...*

*I scrambled to my feet, sick and weak in my stomach, not with fear—the shock had allowed no time for fear—but with the horror of it. The lighter bumped against the boat and I leaped up and tore open the door. The flames were ravenous, eating their way along the hull and there were only two sounds in the horror, the screams and the flames crackling. The doorway was filled with a struggling mass insane with*

*fear, fighting each other without knowing it, knowing only the flames behind them and the planes that would come again. They came tumbling out falling from the doorway to the bottom of the lighter and vainly I tried to get them into order, shouting myself hoarse but they were deaf to anything but the flames.*

*Harry was picking the kids up and carrying them to the other end of the lighter...*

*Now some of the women dropped from the doorway, frightened but holding on to their fear, trying to be brave in front of the kids. The last one came out and I yelled.*

*'Any more?'*

*But she just shook her head and mumbled something in Dutch. The flames now were right along the hull and the heat was terrific, tightening the skin on your face. I put my head in the door and at the far end, crumpled over some seats I could see bodies, two women and four children. But the flames were already starting to envelope them [...]*

*The women and children huddled together, some of the children crying, others just staring, shocked into numbness, and the women were talking, scared as hell but trying to soothe the frightened kids. There were fourteen of them, five women and nine children, and only now, looking at them, did I notice that some of them were wounded and burned. I knelt down amongst them but I knew I couldn't do anything for them. Two of the women and one of the children were badly burned, their clothes flaked and black, their skin cracking and lifting, the flesh shrivelling and turning a reddish-brown. The kid was screaming with the pain and the women were silently crying, biting their lips. I felt helpless and I turned to the two youngsters, both little girls who had been hit by bullets. One of them had fainted and a woman was cradling her head in her lap. The other just sat and stared at the shattered stump of her arm. I knew she had been hit by a bullet and suddenly I got the sickness back in my stomach again.*

*I stood up as Harry ran the lighter in beside the jetty. Men were waiting there for us and they took the Dutch from us as quickly as they could and hurried them up to some railway trucks standing on the wharf line.*

*'What happens now?' I asked from the lighter, looking up at Mac, my VDC platoon sergeant, who seemed to be running things on the jetty [...]*

*Mac leaped down into the boat with us and we swung the lighter out. The lighter was never meant for speed and I felt like jumping over the side and running*

*ahead on the water. There were heads bobbing about in the water and they were lucky the tide was coming in or we might never have caught them. We slowed and bent over the side, dragging them onto the lighter. I was weak inside with revulsion at the way some of them were burned but I tried to make my mind a blank and kept looking towards the point waiting for the planes again. We kept moving around, picking up survivors. I leaned over and lifted up a little boy, whose head was singed bald, from a man who, as soon as I took the kid from him, sank back into the water, disappearing beneath the surface...<sup>13</sup>*

Angela is shaking and the storm outside has not abated. She finishes her work and emails it through to the Museum, makes herself a cup of tea and jumps into bed.

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The following morning Angela walks along the foreshore on the Jetty to Jetty trail. Beyond the Sail Maker's Shed deep swathes of grass are flowering; dark purple, almost black seed heads line the red dirt track, separating her from the mudflats and mangroves. The tamarind trees planted by generations of South East Asian visitors drop their fruit where the pearling camps used to be, and a boab tree, one limb down since last night's storm, dangles a long stem of flowerbuds to caress the grass near City Beach. There is a lot of building going on: a new sea wall and some sort of recreational area with a playground and viewing spots for the Ladder to the Moon. It will be impressive when it's finished but at the moment there are fences and mud and flood water being pumped away. The streets are full of debris, a tree has been uprooted and there are puddles like lakes everywhere. At the far end of the walk, perched up on the point at the campground, the view of the sea is calm, and the sun glances off the water of Roebuck Bay as though the previous night's carnage never happened. Angela looks at her phone: It's 9 o'clock. The Japanese came at 9.30. It is February 17. In two week's time it will be the 77<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the attack. Angela sits down for a moment at the old green picnic table on the point above the beach.

She has no particular interest in walking out across the mudflats at low tide to where the remains of the flying boats lie. Just being here, breathing in the stillness and light of Roebuck Bay after last night's storm is enough. Angela does not need to touch the rusting hulks to feel that the Dutch women and children left something of themselves behind them. Their spirits hover around

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<sup>13</sup> Xav, (1986). They came in the morning: Broome. In C. Harrison-Ford (Ed.), *Fighting Words: Australian War Writings*, pp. 199-202.



her in the shimmering air and in the morning's quiet. She can feel the presence of them here. She can feel the presence of her father too, and there is something else, a ground swell, a pulse, something older and deeper that gathers all these visiting spirits into the vivid red land, and then releases them.

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On a grey and slushy afternoon in Delft, Angela returns home in the dark to find that a package has arrived for her from Australia. She can hardly keep her hand steady as she cuts the top off the padded envelope. Inside she finds a note from the Museum, thanking her for the transcription she made, and a DVD containing one of the oral history interviews she had not been able to borrow from the library. Without pausing to take off her outdoor layers, she slides it into her DVD player. After several passages in which the interviewees discuss their ancestry and upbringing, one of them, Charla Clements, speaks of Charles D'Antoine, who was his uncle, and from whom he has this story:

*What he's most known for is the incident here when the Japanese bombed Broome. He was working on the Catalinas when they came in, cleaning them up, helping with the refuelling—the Japanese came and started shooting at the planes—he jumped in the water to swim back to the jetty and there's people all around him people dying and screaming out and carrying on. And there's a woman and child they were drowning, singing out to him—'Help, help.' He was trying to save himself you know but he can't leave them.*

*He swam back and told the woman—of course she can't speak English and he can't speak Dutch so it's all sign language—he said you know, hang on to my shoulders and the little kid can hang on to your shoulders. So they're hanging on to him and he's trying to swim. The planes were coming along and they'd shoot the people in the water and he's saying we've got to dive under water. He's trying to dive—because you know she's frightened she's trying to pull him out of the water sort of thing. They'd come up and keep on swimming and there's people all around singing out: 'Help! Help'. And he told me the hardest thing in his life he's ever done was to push people away...they're in the water you know and they're crying and I'm crying myself and they're saying: 'Help' and he's saying—'I can't. I can't. I'm sorry. And he's pushing people away you know...'<sup>14</sup>*

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<sup>14</sup> Clements, R. and C. (2011, November 25). E. Rabbitt (Interviewer). Shire of Broome Oral History Project. Local

Charla's voice dies away and Angela sits in the armchair for a long time. Slowly she gets up and moves towards the sideboard where there's a rhysemaughan postcard propped up against a bowl of apples. The image is of camels carrying tourists along Cable Beach and the colours of the sunset are a saturated purple and orange. Beside it, Angela has placed a black and white photograph of Broome's Chinatown taken around 1910, and a sea urchin case, cream and pale brown; dotted patterns and lines form an intricate pattern on the top side while the shell is folded in a series of monochrome scales underneath. These keepsakes are just momentos, souvenirs but they've become talismans for Angela too, objects that promise her a different life, a journey made possible by an older wisdom, a journey that will take her back to Broome and keep her there.

Bowls

## Bowls

Jo was standing side on to the stainless steel bench in the kitchen looking across to the shelf where she kept a collection of five porcelain rice bowls.

She was looking at the bowls, not because they were especially expensive or because she had just brought them home from Good Sammy's or a garage sale, but because her brother had just called and told her that Li had died in hospital in Shanghai, which is where he was living at the time.

When they separated, they had not been living in the same country and, although they had done their best to divide their shared belongings equally, Li had all the photographs of the many trips they'd made together, and she has the five porcelain rice bowls they'd bought in Malaysia. The bowls have always stood on a shelf somewhere in Jo's many Australian kitchens, though they cause her to feel guilty about ending the relationship.

Jo walked across to the shelf and took the bowls down. She lined them up carefully along the kitchen counter, as though she were about to serve rice into them. They looked like a row of empty mouths.

'Chia buoy bo?'

Jo's few words of Aynam hung, untranslated, in the air, and she turned the bowls around so that the birds, painted on their exterior, all flew in the same direction.

## **1.**

Li was coming up Jacob's Ladder. Head down. Grey and white cross trainers hitting the steps—three strides to a breath. Bam. Bam. Bam. He wasn't really fit enough to run and felt the shock of each step in his bones. The muscles in his thighs burned as they powered his legs. Bam. Bam. Bam. He thought again of the students. Already, he was sure, the Chinese government would be working to have their names obliterated from history.

Li threw himself over the top with relief and spun around to look at the view.

Before he came to Perth, he knew little of the West Australian city beyond the Americas' Cup and its good fortune in mineral wealth, but standing at the top of Jacob's Ladder, he admired most the city's natural beauty. The view of the river lulled him, brought him a certain schizophrenic calm; he could stand on this hill, overlooking the Swan River, and put off thinking about Tiananmen and the protest that he would attend tomorrow.

She passed him lightly then, flashed him a smile, as though they had met before, and was gone. He watched her blond bob swishing across the top of her shoulders, clocked the purple canvas

shorts, the white T-shirt, watched her sneakered feet moving past him, and resisted the urge to romanticise, to engage clichés, to follow her like the man in the advertisement for Impulse that he'd seen almost daily on Australian television since his arrival. Still, she was beautiful and, despite all the warnings (veiled or absolute) from his family, especially his Grandmother, he could not bring himself to see her as a 'red-haired devil'.

Li and his compatriots stood apart from the main crowd as Deng Xiaoping burned in effigy on the steps of Parliament. He was relieved that the fire was short lived, that the rags and newspaper construction flared up and burned down quickly, for this was not the quiet vigil he had anticipated. He had visions of his parents back in Malaysia tuning into news of the protest in their living room above the shop, his face singled out of the crowd of 1,500 students and human rights activists.

Would he be detained for questioning as he got off the plane in KL? Would the authorities cancel his Malaysian passport and shred his hard won Australian degree, tossing it out the window of a billion ringgit NEP sky scraper? He imagined his parents, who had hidden with him behind the triple barred doors of his grandmother's house during the race riots of 1969, waiting in the street below. Outwardly brave and hopeful, they would turn to each other and say mournfully, 'Why so involved lah?' 'What for?' 'Better stay quiet.'

It was then that Li noticed her, the girl from Jacob's Ladder, standing with a group from Amnesty International. She was holding up a placard—a grainy enlargement of The Tank Man. END HUMAN RIGHTS ABUSE IN CHINA was printed underneath.

## 2.

They met frequently at yoga class and went out for cheap eats in Northbridge. Li took her to his favourite Malaysian restaurant. It was not much wider than a corridor with a servery that would fit inside a standard suburban kitchen. Chicken Kapitan quickly became Jo's regular order while the staff, with whom Li could converse in Aynam and Cantonese, brought him extra chilli in a tiny bowl and recommended him a portion of something extra that was not on the English language menu.

When she was with Li, Jo became a guest within her own city. Her parents' manicured suburb, and the sedate buildings and lawns of UWA, seemed a world away from Northbridge where people seemed to move with a swift energy, one eye cocked for the next opportunity. Jo came to realise that Li was like that too. He'd come to Perth originally to study mechanical engineering, but finding that he lacked sufficient technical ingenuity to excel at it, he'd changed his major to computing which he could see would make him employable anywhere in Australia or Asia for the foreseeable future.

Jo's own studies were in History and Politics and would not, of themselves, get her a job. In moments of self-derision she would say, I'm doing a BA (Bugger All). She assumed that she would, eventually, teach.

Whenever they ate in Northbridge, the staff went out of their way to make them both feel welcome but Jo realised that many personal remarks were being exchanged about her that she didn't understand. As time went by she came to anticipate this, learning to smile voicelessly at the right moment. To please Li she learned to pour tea with two hands, to use chopsticks with Chinese politeness, to buy mandarins out of season for Chinese New Year...and he loved her,

'Wor ai ne,' he said. 'Wor ai ne.'

When she was with Li she became a quieter version of herself, and she found it restful.

### 3.

By the time Li's grandmother and her family left Hainan Island during World War II almost a third of the men of her village had been killed by the Japanese. To be brought up by grandmother was to be brought up with gratitude and ghosts.

After he moved to Perth, grandmother began visiting Li in his dreams and behind her came trailing a miscellany of characters from the Chinese stories he had grown up with: apothecaries to bring him charms that would ensure he travels home to his family; birds to bring him good fortune; a dragon that he might aspire to excellence. Li woke from these dreams as though stepping out of a childhood photograph. He lay awake recalling the many afternoons he'd spent with her, the splash of water and scent of orange blossom as they watered her tiny garden. He recalled his grandmother's face, her eyes, her smile, her talk-story Aynam.

It was hard for Li to convey the depth and significance of this relationship to Jo, whose own grandparents had passed away, and whose belief system did not extend to apothecaries and dragons. On the anniversary of their first Northbridge meal he gave her a book by Maxine Hong Kingston by way of an explanation, not because he felt he had been brought up the same way but because he wanted her to understand the importance of myth and story in his family, and the role his grandmother plays in his life as the one who retains them.

When his grandmother died the following year Li told Jo: 'She was my mother. She was the one who raised me.' She heard him, but he knew she hadn't understood.

Li had been born after Malaysian Independence but had completed school while English was still the language of instruction. And he had transitioned easily enough to UWA. All the same there were many things that he seemed unable to make Jo understand. Sometimes he thought this was not his English, but his upbringing. In Malaysia it was not a good idea for Chinese

'immigrants' to speak their mind. He had learned to stay quiet, to comply, to seek harmony rather than press his point. He marvelled at Jo, and her Australian friends who lived their lives out loud.

#### 4.

Preparations for the Chinese New Year holiday were far advanced by the time Li and Jo arrived in Ipoh. Long lines of firecrackers hung from above doorways and out of upstairs windows to be let off at midnight like myriad gunshots or the percussion section of an orchestra gone berserk. When the time came, Jo stood quietly at a distance from the family celebration watching and listening as Li stood forward; the eldest son, home this year to light the firecrackers.

The next morning all was festivity. The family wished each other Gong Xi Fa Chai and Li and his siblings came to their parents to accept ang paw, given and received with two hands, two smiles, two inclinations of the head. The family altar was awash with money and adorned with mandarin pyramids. The food for the day was offered to the Gods before they ate.

'Out of respect lah. Out of respect,' Li whispered in her ear.

Afterwards, as the long day of yum cha, tea and visiting drew to a close, Jo and Li sat with his brother and sister around the big formica topped table in the darkened restaurant, eating neat cubes of rock melon off toothpicks. Li's sister, recently married, had come home for a visit so as to meet the 'red haired devil', and Li's brother was back from KL. Inevitably the conversation came round to the possibility of Li's brother entering for a degree in Australia, but all seemed to think that his English was not good enough.

'Your English is better than my Chinese,' said Jo with a self-deprecatory smile.

Li and his siblings had laughed at that, but then they had grown quiet. The overhead fans were still, the formica table tops shone and the fridges behind them gave off a deep-throated hum. Jo would have liked to ask them about other things: the immigration status of the many Indonesian labourers she'd seen in KL; the anti-American graffiti daubed on a wall nearby; the attitude of Malaysians to the Gulf War which was raging nightly across the television screen, but it never seemed to be the right moment.

Afterwards Li and Jo lay awake for a long time feeling the house shake as the road trains passed by. They spoke of the possibility of staying on in Perth, or of moving perhaps to KL, where Jo might find work teaching English, and Li could work for a Chinese boss. Eventually Li said,

'My family is afraid of losing me.'

'Both our families are afraid—mine when we're in Malaysia, yours when we're in Australia.'

'What about Singapore?'

Jo was silent.

‘Would you live in Singapore with me?’ Li persisted.

‘Okay,’ she said. ‘Okay.’

The next day they bought the bowls. A gift for the two of them, something they would share and use together in Perth, then Singapore.

## 5.

Jo woke at five in the morning with the darkness pressing in on her and knew at once and decisively that she could not do it.

Like a heroine from Chinese mythology, or a Maxine Hong Kingston book, Jo found herself wrestling in the night with a sitting ghost. Only she was no Brave Orchid, and the sitting ghost was not vanquished but instead grew bigger and heavier and sat on her chest with more weight every night as the days before her scheduled departure for Singapore evaporated.

During the day, she pushed the knowledge of what she had to do to the edge of her mind, pretending to herself that everything would be the same: Li was away visiting his family, he would come back, their life in Australia would continue as it had done before. That worked for a time, enabling her to maintain a confident front during the day, but at night she would wake at three or five and lie mute, weighed down, pinned to the sheet, unable to move from beneath the sitting ghost she had conjured up through her own anxiety and fear.

She understood later that it was some kind of panic attack, and that she might have been able to move through it with the right kind of help. All she knew at the time—all at once and definitively, waking at five and with the darkness pressing in on her, was that she didn’t want to go, indeed couldn’t go—not to live. Perhaps it was a failure of imagination but she was afraid, not only of all the differences between them, but of becoming voiceless, of living only half a life.

Li hung up the phone and looked across the darkened restaurant. He gripped the edge of the shop counter, closed his eyes and let himself be taken over by the sound of the road trains passing outside. Afterwards he focussed his eyes on the details—the tidy rows of glasses, the stacks of bowls, the large can of Nescafe, the red and gold of the altar above the telephone.

‘I’m not coming.’

‘I’m not coming.’

‘I’m not coming.’

The overhead fans were still, the formica table tops shone, the fridges gave out an orderly deep-throated hum but he felt himself falling—

How would he tell his family?

## Photographs

Li was kneeling on the linoleum floor of his sister's living room in Kuala Lumpur unpacking boxes. He planned to throw some things away before moving to Shanghai and was making piles: one to keep, one to throw away and one to think about. The 'think about' pile was growing more quickly than he would have liked and the 'throw away' pile had so far attracted only an old sarong and two out of date computing textbooks.

He still hasn't found the five porcelain rice bowls they had bought together in Ipoh and he wondered if perhaps Jo had them.

Li forced himself to stay on task and lifted half a dozen photo envelopes out of the box in front of him. Plump with memories, the yellow Kodak bundles slipped within his grasp and, as he made to steady them, the middle packet shot out onto the floor spilling pictures across the faux-tile linoleum. The stylised flower bouquets that decorated the centre of each square were suddenly obscured by images of Jo and Western Australia. As Li shepherded the photographs back into their envelope he hesitated for a moment over one he used to love, remembering how they sometimes bought each other fruit: rambutan, mangosteen and lychees in Malaysia; mangoes, cherries and peaches in Western Australia. Looking at the photo Li felt again the weight of linked cherries hanging from his ears.

Jo was zipped into an old polypropylene jacket. Her blonde hair was bobbed short and her dark eye lashes brushed the top of her cheeks as she looked down into a box laden with ripe cherries. There was a full-lipped half-smile on her face and her right hand was extended over the fruit, at just such an angle that Li could make out the fresh graze across her knuckles where she'd hurt herself messing with tent pegs the day before.

Li recalled that it had rained that trip. It had rained so much that they'd decided to go walking anyway; several hours in the Porongorups in the rain. Afterwards they'd abandoned their drooping tents under the trees and driven off to Albany to look for cherries and for somewhere that, for the price of a pot of tea, they could dry out.

Li put the photo back in the envelope. He had spent a lot of time being angry with her after their initial break up but these days, without a picture, he could barely imagine her face any longer. Jo had become just another aspect of Australia, something that happened to a different version of himself, a version that lived there and not here.



*The former Gwalla Estate is now located on the southern edge of the Northampton Town boundary, and covers an area both east and west of the Northwest Coastal Highway. The main part of the estate, formerly location 315, is situated on a series of low, rolling hills sloping westward, with valleys in between [...]*

*On first examination, the core area of the estate can be divided into four main sections. The first is the northern area containing the housing; in the middle is the church and graveyard; southwards is the mine shafts and buildings, while along the west are gardens and orchards [...]*

*1890s memoirs also briefly describe the agricultural scene at Gwalla, presenting a picture which is remarkably consistent with the 1907 plan.*

*'Not far from the workings at the main lode a vineyard was planted which produced fair crops of grapes, and on the ground, along the front of where the Northampton railway now stands, a fine little vegetable garden was cultivated, Mr William Sandford, an English gardener being in charge. The water from the mine was used to irrigate the garden with. In 1866 a few apples were taken from some trees that were growing in the garden, and both tobacco and sugar were raised as an experiment.'*

*[...] it is the church, situated on the highest hill and overlooking both mine and cottages, that provides the dominant feature of the design and is one of the keys to understanding the nature of the Gwalla settlement. [...] In many ways it was a sort of model community, going far beyond being a simple mining venture and including in its scheme both agricultural and pastoral development and the establishment of a village community.*

- Martin Gibbs.<sup>16</sup>

Chesten sat watching a flock of dust motes rise and fall over the bent heads of her pupils. Her elbow was leaned on the desk and her chin was leaned on her hand, and she fancied that the dust motes were borne upwards and kept aloft by the energy of the children's thinking. Other than the steady squeak and scratch of writing, there was silence, enough of a pause in the busy morning that

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<sup>15</sup> This story is a deliberate inversion of Joyce, J. (1967). Eveline. *Dubliners*, pp. 32-37.

<sup>16</sup> Excerpted from Gibbs, M. (1997). Landscapes of meaning: Joseph Lucas Horrocks and the Gwalla Estate, Northampton. *Studies in Western Australian History* 17, 35-55.

Chesten felt she might at last occupy herself with marking yesterday's arithmetic. She sat up, looked down at her hands laid flat on the desk below her shirt-buttoned breast, and screwed her face up tight to stifle a yawn. From somewhere deep in her, deeper even than the mine tunnels in which the brothers and fathers of her charges were now toiling in their pressed-felt helmets and tallow candles, came a restless feeling that she didn't understand.

Few people visit the schoolhouse. The Inspector came last week, with his questions, and his notebook, and his Perth manners. He had been a lively man, interested to discuss with Chesten the variance between the number of children enrolled and the number who regularly attended school. And he had told the usual Cornish jokes: 'What's a mine? A hole with a Cornishman at the bottom of it.' But the Inspector had known Wordsworth too and Chesten had been seized by the desire to run after him when he left so eager was she to hear and speak of things outside of Gwalla.

Gwalla! She looked around the room, considering its simple walls, the stove at one end to keep them warm in the winter, and the children seated in their rows. The Tregonning twins were her youngest charges at only four and a half, then came Paula, the widow Polperro's daughter. Her little brother had fallen into the well and drowned last month. After her there was a gap followed by a cluster of five-year-old boys, three of whom were named Jacob, which led to considerable merriment when she called the roll. Her eyes came to rest on the seven and eight-year-olds. One of the girls, a steady, dark-haired child by the name of Jane was able to read already far beyond her age level, and asked consistently interesting and sometimes complicated questions. Recently, emboldened perhaps by her middle brother's deserting the school room for a job at the mine, and Chesten having taken Sunday lunch at her home once or twice, Jane had stopped by her desk after school. They had sat together for a time in the Spring sunshine discussing, as it had turned out, both their futures. Chesten had encouraged Jane to work hard and to try for a place at Perth College. Ought she to have done that? To gift Jane that scent of cordite? To strike flint against tinder, to set off that scurry of tiny explosives that might eventually lead Jane to leave Gwalla, to crave a life for herself that is different from the one her mother had?

Chesten looked out the window at the fecundity of the garden. She cannot pass it by these days without stopping to take in the scent of herbs, or to pick a fresh pea from the vine, snapping it open for the embryonic seeds, chomping down on the pod. She should be so content here, facilitating the same round of church picnics and school concerts that she knew at Moonta, applauding the boys' impromptu billy cart races.

Her father, who had come up to Gwalla from Moonta a few years ago to provide advice on the mine's drainage system, had described it all to her before she came. 'It'll be just like home, Chesten,' he had said. When she'd seen how happy he and her mother were for her to be leaving

Moonta, something they had never approved of before, she had smiled and kissed them, counting herself lucky to have their blessing.

From the first moment she'd set foot in Gwalla, Chesten had felt enveloped by the familiarity of the place. It was as if someone had studied all the pictures of a Cornish village and then set out to develop Gwalla, West Australia, as a replica, a mirror image. Here, on the sandy bed of the Murchison River, at the edge of the map and at the bottom of the world, there was to be everything a Cornish family might need.

Standing against the whitewashed wall of the church on her first day, looking down into the valley, Chesten had been struck by the orderliness of it all; the mine head, surrounded by cottages, the road, finished either side with stone hedges, the tidy orchards and gardens, the trial plantings of wheat. On that first day, when she'd stood and looked down at the miners' homes she knew, without entering them, what she would find there. As certainly as if she could bend down and take the roofs off the cottages, Chesten knew that within each one there would be a scrubbed wooden table and a bible and somewhere, a croder croghen holding all the odds and sods that could find no other place on chimney board or dresser: string, nails, candle-ends. Every detail of the place was familiar to her. Gwalla was a Cornish mining town, like her birthplace, Moonta, like Redruth in Cornwall—the town her parents had left behind.

Soon, Chesten knew she would be expected to leave her school room, and her books, to marry. Jane's older brother Daniel has already proposed, and Chesten has promised to give him an answer tomorrow, the day of the Governor's visit. If she says 'yes' then her parents will come to Gwalla to meet him and his family, and they will be happy for her, happy too to begin planning for her wedding, and for all their married life together afterwards. If she says 'no' then Daniel will be too ashamed to look her in the eye, and her easy friendship with his parents, with Jane and their other two children, will be spoiled. And people will talk. They will say she thinks she's too good for him or accuse her of having led him on. The girl who helps old Mr Pender at the store would be glad. She has always liked Daniel, and with Chesten out of the picture, she would have her chance.

The dust motes were still rising and falling in the air above the children's heads but the students were growing tired of the task she had assigned them. Amidst the sounds of their fidgeting she imagined she could hear her mother's voice,

'Who can find a virtuous woman? For her price is far above rubies...'

It was a bible verse. Chesten and her sisters knew it by heart, and it summed up everything her parents wanted for them: a good life, a respectable life, a life of piety, honesty and hard work. But was it the life she wanted?

Chesten stood up suddenly and clapped her hands. She must keep her doubts to herself. She must be quiet and think. In the meantime, she will collect the children's work and release them early to prepare for the Governor's visit in the morning.

Chesten stood in the expectant crowd on the riverside and waited for the Governor's cart to pass. Daniel held her hand and the blue sky flew like a flag above them. Jane stood at her left, trying her best to be patient, but the excitement of the people around her was catching, so that every so often she would say: 'When is he coming? When is he coming?' And Chesten would shush her, and say, as she used to say to her own small sister: 'Soon Jane. Soon.'

Between the heads of the people in front of her she could see across to the other side of the river. There were several men stationed there, and then another group ten or so yards further along. Before she could ask Daniel what they were doing—the preparations all having been made on the Gwalla side—a cheer went up and the first cart load of VIPs came abreast of them. Daniel was speaking to her then, something about the boys from the mine organising a twenty-one-gun salute without a cannon. Jane was pulling at her too, so that Chesten felt overwhelmed for a moment by the crowd and the excitement, and the getting up earlier than usual to help make everything ready, and she wished she had not left her hat at the school where the refreshment tables had been set up for afterwards, for though it was only Spring she was thirsty now and could feel the thin valley of bare skin that ran down the middle of her head burning, burning.

When the first explosion came she was surprised because aside from the blast, she wasn't ready for the crowd's reaction. On every side there were screams of delight and flabbergasted laughter. Explosion after explosion rang out echoing up and down the valley until the air itself seemed to be reverberating. Across the river you could see dust rising high into the air in one place after another as the cordite did its work.

Chesten's heart leapt up with the dust to thud against her ribs. Her mouth felt dry and full of dirt and she had a headache starting. With a quick word to Jane and Daniel—they would later say 'she said something about fetching her hat'—Chesten moved through the crowd and ran towards the school room.

Vivienne puts on a hat and walks across the park to the synagogue and the women's study session. She hasn't told her husband Grant about it, just rearranged her hours at the Bank. This morning they will study Ruth and there's a flock of lorikeets in the park. Vivienne stops to watch them balancing on the narrow stems, tipping themselves over, squawking and feasting, upside down. The birds are one of her consolations for staying on in Perth: her daughters, Mandy and Fiona, left long ago.

The synagogue is a low-lying brick building, designed to fit in with its suburban neighbours. Security is tight and when Vivienne arrives the door has already been locked. She knocks too loudly, and curses the lorikeets as she waits for the secretary to come and let her in. Rows of prayer books are stacked on shelves that run the full length of the vestibule, but Vivienne ignores them and opens a door to her right, taking a seat at the back. She is sweating now and feels self-conscious in a too-small hat she bought last time she visited Mandy in Jerusalem. The speaker's hair is completely covered by a Borough Park-style snood. After the talk she will offer them tea in styrofoam cups. Vivienne shrugs. The story of Ruth annoys her. She sees the biblical Ruth as the exact opposite of her own youngest daughter. Ruth, the Moabite, left her own country to become Jewish and to live in Israel: Fiona, Vivienne's youngest, has left her yiddishkeit behind to go and live with a man she hasn't married in Taupo, New Zealand, where she'll probably never meet another Jew.

*When the girls were little and I read them 'The Three Billy Goats Gruff' they used to call me the 'con-Troll'. They were confusing the two words of course but there was a grain of truth in it for all that. Lately I'm not in control. Inanimate objects drop out of my hands. Hairbrush. Biro. Potato peeler. Pegs. I'm ridiculous at remembering. I get to the supermarket, and I can't remember what I came for. I lock my keys in the car, forget my bag and post letters without stamps so that my thoughts drop dumbly into oblivion.*

*Needless to say, this sends me into a fury. I snap gracelessly at retail staff and snarl at the philosophy of onlookers. There is a miasma-like fury coiled inside me. When I breathe I can feel it hissing out my pores.*

Vivienne leans across her chopping board and the blunted, skinless potatoes to phone the Local Council. She wants to find out what the lorikeets' trees are called. The receptionist puts her on hold so that she catches the radio news—

'The highway through New Zealand's central North Island is closed tonight as Mount Ruapehu continues to erupt—'

Vivienne dials Fiona's number. They speak on the phone less often than Vivienne would like. Lately they have been saying very little, just holding onto the phone and the silence between them, as if it were a blanket and they were survivors, which in a way they are.

'Don't worry Mum. The biggest risk is from lahars and they've got scientists working out an early warning system.'

Vivienne is unimpressed by the scientists and their early warning system. 'How's Sean?'

'He's moved out.'

Vivienne stands in silence for a moment, 'How do you feel about that?'

'I'm not exactly surprised—'

Vivienne looks at the potatoes, their shapes made mysterious by being under water.

'He was never home anyway.'

Vivienne senses the militant edge in Fiona's voice and knows that in a moment they will hurtle into one of those roller coaster conversations about guilt and blame and forgiveness. She sits down, suddenly tired.

*I'm floating in the hot sky over Ruapehu. The air is full of ash and steam and my skin feels tight in the heat. Grant is here and Fiona and Sean, but we cannot see each other. We move further and further apart, choking and spinning in the murky air, until each of us is completely alone. I don't know what the others are doing. I'm looking for Max. I begin in a mild panic, as you do when you've lost something. I become more and more frantic and then, just as I see him I wake up dry eyed, my heart thumping, my skin pricking with frustration and anger.*

*I'm not going back to the women's study session. It's not helping. At least Grant will never know that I almost became 'an older Jewish woman wearing a hat.'*

Vivienne is shopping at the Chinese grocer she's been going to since the girls were small when she notices a cardboard sign tucked behind the beaten up till. M-I-A-S-M-A it says. 'Whose word is that?' Vivienne asks, aware that English is Mr Sing's fourth language.

'My son did dat. I never hear it before. You like it?'

Vivienne counters with 'solfatara' and asks if he's been following the volcanic eruption.

'Dat volcano like an angry lady,' he says.

'Or an angry man,' says Vivienne putting her change carefully away, but she has to concentrate so as to unlock the car without dropping her eggs.

As she comes home she hears Fiona's voice leaving her a telephone message. She's too late to pick it up.

‘Mum are you there? The ash fall’s become so bad that I’m going further North. Nothing to worry about. I’ll be staying with Aroha. Call me on my mobile. Bye.’

Fiona is driving when Vivienne calls her back. She works as a PR consultant in the tourism industry. The eruption has made her busier than ever.

‘Oh yeah, someone’s sent me a crank letter. Whoever it is accuses me of letting Sean down.’

Vivienne feels suddenly as if she’s taken a shot of whiskey. ‘When did it arrive?’

‘This morning. I cleared the box before I left.’

‘Why don’t you take a few days off up at Aroha’s—

‘Because I can’t.’

Vivienne hears a firmness in Fiona’s voice that catches her off guard. ‘I’ve been wondering what to do with Max’s quilt.’

‘For God’s sake don’t send it back.’

Grant and Vivienne flew home soon after the funeral feeling that Sean and Fiona needed to be together without them there. Back home Grant went straight into a steady routine of work, exercise and services. Vivienne too returned to work, four shifts a week at the local Bank. Previously she’s been on good terms with the other tellers but she hasn’t been herself lately. She watches her hands break open the neat paper-wrapped stacks of coins, counting, weighing notes. She smiles calmly across the counter but away from the customers she is silent and angry. Her colleagues have been avoiding her, even Pusbah with whom she used to share a vegetarian but not quite kosher samosa.

Sometimes when she gets home from work Vivienne holds Max’s quilt around her shoulders, imagining it still holds the warmth and scent of him. She remembers how she sat quietly in the air conditioning working out all the details of the zoo theme...and around the border kiwi, tui, pukeko: birds she’d discovered on her trips across to New Zealand. Sean had suggested they put the quilt in the casket with Max but Fiona had said no. Just as well really. Vivienne’s never felt right about putting possessions in with the dead. It makes her hair stand up on end, but now she wishes they had.

*Fiona phoned again today. There’s been another one of those letters. This time accusing her of not being a good Jewish mother, of not being any kind of mother, after all she let her boyfriend run over her kid. What does she expect?*

*I’m so agitated. I write and write but my head is full of static. I can’t find stillness anywhere... I worry about Fiona. I get up in the middle of the night and watch the day’s coverage of Ruapehu.*

*'Pit of noise'. How I envy you your steaming fury, your wrathful plumes of ash.*

The next time Vivienne phones she lets Fiona talk for a while before asking her again about the quilt. Fiona goes silent and Vivienne is about to distract her with Grant's news when her daughter's voice comes back to her,

'Do you remember how Grandpa used to take us out sailing in the little red boat? Well, the first time he took us out past the jetty with the sail full of wind I asked him what he was going to do with his boat when he died. He told me that Mandy and I could have it. The little red boat would be ours one day. And then he sold it.'

'You thought he'd promised it to you?'

'We were away in London, Israel. Whatever.'

'You were hurt.'

'Yeah.'

Vivienne is silent.

'Mum? Max didn't promise anyone anything. You know? Just do whatever you want with the quilt.'

'What are you going to do about the letters?'

'I'm not going to let the bastards grind me down.'

After she rings off, Vivienne goes out to the kitchen and fills a glass with water. She comes back and sits by the window. The palm trees are casting their long zany shadows across the grass like something out of the Doctor Seuss books she read to Max.

Vivienne puts down her glass and takes up a pair of scissors and the quilt. At first she breaks gently into one stitch at a time so that the cotton unravels and separates from the fabric, leaving a row of small pitiable holes. Vivienne follows these tiny Braille markings, brushing away the stray loops and bobbles of cotton with light soft strokes, until her inner agitation demands a larger movement. Using both hands she yanks open a long border seam, rending the fabric, filling the silent air with a storm of ripping and tearing so that threads of material and dust float in the afternoon sunlight, fall and settle, like ash. When Vivienne stops, her mouth is dry and she feels strangely separate from the wreckage at her feet. She holds the base of her neck with her hand as though the exertion of speech might break it. The telephone rings. She doesn't pick it up.

'Mum, Dad, it's Mandy. I'm home in Jerusalem. Just phoned to see how you're doing. Love you. Bye.'



Vivienne manages to call her back before Shabbat on Friday. Mandy's preparing for a big Friday night dinner and talks quickly, outlining her own theories about the letters, and Sean's recent departure. Fiona has had another letter that morning and phoned Mandy in distress,

'It's more of the same stuff: Why is Fiona staying on in Taupo so far from her family? She's being selfish of her wider family's needs. She was too Jewish in the way she dealt with Max's death. Sean feels left out.'

Vivienne can feel beads of sweat breaking out on her forehead. Whoever wrote the letters seems to have set out to provoke them jointly, rudely pushing and nudging at the open wounds of all their griefs.

'Fiona's a practical girl. She'll deal with it.'

'I don't think Fiona's coping as well as she pretends.'

Silence.

Mum?

Somewhere Vivienne remembers reading that owls fly at night, guided by an imprint they have laid down in their brains during the day. In a storm, or with a sudden change in the landscape, they fly into things. Vivienne has always thought that people are like that too, if place or circumstances change too fast.

'I can't talk anymore. Shabbat Shalom Mandy.'

Vivienne is caught up in a sweep of anger and frustration so powerful that she picks up a vase off the kitchen bench and hurls it across the tiled dining room. It smashes against the wall under the window. The green glass vase that once belonged to her Mother.

When Vivienne was twenty, it seemed as if her Mother-less state separated her off somehow. It wasn't something she could talk about easily, few friends had experienced a grief like it and so, when she spoke to anyone at all she ended up feeling guilty—guilty when she needed to talk—guilty when she didn't feel like talking. And now she feels it again, the same mix of anger and frustration, the shock of grief's power.

'Viv.' Grant has come home to find her crouched under the window, picking up green glass fragments. They hold each other for a while, not talking, and then, 'I think you should see someone.'

The receptionist leads Vivienne upstairs to the back right hand corner of the building where the rooms have tree top views. The room is painted cream and furnished simply with a blue carpet and two comfortable cane chairs. Vivienne settles in one to wait, and looks across at what must be the counsellor's desk, empty except for a telephone, a pot plant and two unusually round stones. They make Vivienne think of New Zealand river stones and she looks away. Just then the door opens gently and the counsellor comes in.

‘How are you?’ she asks.

‘Fine. Better than I was.’

There’s a long silence. Vivienne looks down at the palm of her left hand and rubs the base of her ring finger, massaging bone. And then Vivienne is crying, enormous sobs of regret, slobbering sobs that burst into the room and banish silence, sobs that make her shoulders heave and her head ache but she doesn’t care, and realizes that this must have been what she was avoiding all along, ‘I’m sorry.’

‘Don’t be.’

Vivienne helps herself to tissues and blows her nose. Then she opens her bag and takes out a small package of journal entries and letters. ‘I wrote these,’ she says.

*For a moment I was Ruapehu and a massive flow of mud and debris was spilling out of me. The scientists were disappointed (I’d been too swift for them) and I was sending a catastrophic lahar, a churning down the mountain...Then I dwindled into a small, older woman whose daughters have moved away, whose grandson has died, and whose grief has, for a season, overwhelmed her.*

Fiona never expected to be the kind of woman who arranged to have her carpet cleaned prior to Rosh Hashanah. But here she is on mat leave, a stay-at-home Mum with a baby and a dirty carpet. There is also a crack in the front step. She notices it again when she opens the door for the Carpet Cleaner. ‘Hello,’ she says.

‘I remember you. I clean your carpet this time last year.’

‘Yes that's right.’

‘It was 9/11.’

She feels propelled into an unlooked-for intimacy. This man was the first person Fiona spoke to about it after her husband, yet he is a complete stranger...so she introduces herself again, a year later, and they stand on the widening crack in her front door step determining where to send the outflow of suds and froth from the carpet cleaning equipment. While he is telling her that some customers object to the wastewater going on to their garden, she is thinking—none of us know anything about each other really, even when we know each other's names.

As they make arrangements for payment the Carpet Cleaner reminds her that he, Azmal is from Afghanistan. ‘Like the Tampa men’ thinks Fiona. She wonders where he was, and who he was with when he heard the news.

*In the biggest attack on America since Pearl Harbour...*

Fiona had turned towards the TV with a jar of Heinz Apricot Rice in one hand. It was 9.30 pm. She was packing up the baby's bag. It was September and she was having the carpet cleaned for Rosh Hashanah. In the end, she had stayed overnight at her parents and watched a man falling on their tiny TV.

Fiona bought a copy of the newspaper on the way home the next morning, so that her daughter would be able to see what sort of world it was when she was older, and when she came home to the smell of damp and chemicals, from the carpet having been cleaned, she noticed the post-it-notes stuck to the fridge. It made her think of all the post-it-notes that would never be found, because of the collapse of the buildings and because of the fires, and she imagined the post-it-notes all arriving in heaven at once, like confetti from the advance party or a ticker tape parade. She imagined God walking across his lawn strewn with little coloured papers... He must have thought they were prayers until he bent down, placed his hand level with his shoe, and read them:

Cheesecake

Candles

Bread

Water

Birds.

## Interiors

The bath and basin were baby bottom pink, a wide strip of black tiling ran around the walls and the floor was piebald terrazzo.

‘Liquorice Allsorts,’ said Cath.

‘Art Deco,’ replied the real estate agent, an English woman called Jill.

‘There’s nothing wrong with it really—it’s not as if anything important happens in a bathroom,’ said Mark, turning the taps on and off and flushing the toilet.

So, they bought it, a brick bungalow with a veranda and a Hills Hoist, a permanent West Australian address.

When Cath heard the roller door on the garage go up and the click, click, click of bike gears she drew her shoulders together; Mark was home. The big kids would greet him before his bag hit the ground but after that, Cath knew, he would appear at the door of the pink bathroom in his cyclist’s lycra.

She continued to sit on the low plastic stool from which she could supervise Olly in the water and rest her pregnant belly against the bath.

‘The pink bathroom is our cocoon,’ she said aloud making a rhyme for the two-year old.

‘Hello,’ said Mark, speaking to Olly behind her, ‘Having a nice bath?’

‘How was your day?’ Cath asked.

‘Okay’, he said and turned away from her to strip off and hang his cycling gear on the two chrome hooks he'd attached to the back of the door.

When he turned back Cath was giving Olly’s face a perfunctory wipe.

‘Here—let me do that.’

‘It’s okay. I’m done,’ said Cath, wringing out the face cloth and hanging it on the side of the bath. ‘Aren’t you going to Kalgoorlie tomorrow?’

‘We’ll talk later,’ Mark said and went out.

Cath coaxed Olly to pull out the plug and the throaty laugh of drain water filled the pink bathroom.

When their alarm went off on Wednesday Mark didn't move. He was flying up to Kalgoorlie later, as Project Engineer for his new Company—away until Friday—the last three days before the baby’s due date. He knew he should go through to the kitchen to help cut lunches and breakfast the kids, but somehow Cath always seemed to have things done before he could start. Mark yawned and stretched; from where he lay he could see his favourite skis stacked, redundant, against the wall.

Cath dumped oats into a bowl, added water, salt, sultanas, selected High for four minutes and pressed Start. She cleaned her teeth, took her vitamins, drank some water, stirred the porridge, made the lunches, peeled Olly off her leg, gave Juliet and Sam their breakfast, strapped Olly into the high chair, fed and changed him, put him in the car, hassled Juliet and Sam to clean their teeth and put their shoes on, reminded them to pack their bags, got five-year-old Sam into the car, saw Juliet out the door, ran back inside to throw some clothes on herself, got in the car, went back to collect Juliet's bag, got to the car again, quelled a brother versus sister stoush in the back seat, drove to school, stopped in the kiss and fly zone, dropped the kids off and drove home. Mark's taxi was parked in the drive when she got back so she said goodbye quickly and held Olly up on the veranda rail so that he could see Daddy wave as the taxi pulled away.

Cath drove slowly on the afternoon trip to school, braking gently to let a pair of magpies flap haphazardly across the road in front of her. Olly was snoozing in the back and odd flashes of television and security camera footage crossed the screen of the reversing camera. Mostly the camera collected upside-down television and interiors, the back room of the deli or the Lotto shop, but today, as she pulled into the library car park, the camera displayed a snow-covered mountain range. Cath shut off the engine and gathered up her books. She felt suddenly exposed—as if her internal landscape, her own private homesickness were on display.

'Hello!' said an English voice behind her. 'How are you getting on in the house?'

'Good,' said Cath, striving to match Jill's friendly tone. 'Good. Mark's away for a few days but we're okay.'

'When's bubby due?'

'Friday.'

'Have you got family coming over?'

'Nup.'

Jill's glasses made her eyes look bigger than they were. 'I'll come over this evening and do the baths for you.'

Cath was about to refuse her but Jill was brusque, 'I'll be there at five,' she said, and posted *A Year in Provence* through the returns slot.

When Jill knocked on the door, Cath was serving up baked bean dinners at the bench, running Olly's bath and supervising Juliet's attempt at a Grecian helmet—the floor was a mass of torn newspaper and a soggy papier-mache balloon was balanced on the dining table.

'I'll go!' shouted Sam, wiping his gluey hands on his shirt.

Cath greeted Jill with relief and once the kids were in bed, encouraged her to stay for a hot

drink.

Jill stood looking at the pictures Mark had hung beside the recycled rimu bookcase while the younger woman went to make tea. Cath and Mark seemed happy in these photos—painting her parents' bach, kayaking on the Milford Sound, tramping around Lake Minchin.

'Our life before kids,' said Cath, coming to stand beside her.

'You're not in this one,' said Jill indicating an image of Mark on top of Mount Cook.

'No. That was taken a week after I'd had Juliet. Mark's always been more fanatical than me when it comes to bagging peaks.'

'Did you ski?' asked Jill, accepting a tea mug emblazoned with 'Coronet Peak'. I've always wanted to learn.'

'It'll end up on your bucket list.'

'Thanks.'

'Seriously. Let me give you a first lesson in exchange for all your help. Come on.'

Jill looked at her sideways but put down her mug.

'No time like the present,' said Cath, encouraging Jill to move her feet into the wedge position.

'Like this?'

'That's it. Now bend your knees and lean forward... Yup. And then you swoosh off down the slope and hope to God you aren't taken out by a snow boarder,' said Cath, miming the likely collision with a laugh.

'Look out. You'll drop the baby,' said Jill steadying Cath before sitting down herself. And then, as though apologising for her concern, 'I used to be a midwife.'

'I'm a nurse.'

New laughter ballooned out of them until Cath slopped tea across her pregnant belly and stopped to mop herself up.

'Here,' said Jill passing her a box of tissues.

'Thanks,' Cath patted at her T-shirt ineffectually. 'Thanks for befriending a pregnant stranger.'

'Mark's away a lot, isn't he?'

'Is it Fly-in-Fly-Out? Feels like it.'

'And when he's home?'

'It's not *Country Calendar*.'

Jill looked puzzled.

'You know, in it together boots and all, shoulder to shoulder, through all weathers, solid farming families... We're not like that though everyone thinks we are.'

'No one can say what it's like inside another person's marriage.'

Cath was silent. She felt disloyal talking about Mark but since the move she's come to realise that it was the companionship of her woman friends that kept her going.

'It's good enough.'

Mark called while Cath was bathing Olly the following evening. 'I'm not sleeping well,' he said.

'I bet you're sleeping better than the fat lady who's getting up three times to piss in the night.'

'Yeah—well it's not a competition.'

'Better get some sleep before you come back here,' said Cath.

'Right. Can I speak with the kids?'

'Sam! Juliet! It's your father.'

As she lifted hot soup out of the microwave at lunchtime on Thursday, Cath tripped on a plastic stegosaurus and scalded her right hand. Pain arrived instantaneously and reduced her to perching on the side of the pink bathtub with her hand under the cold tap of the basin sobbing and shouting for her mother, who died five months ago. Cath made so much noise that Olly came to stand beside her which only made Cath want to stop crying but she couldn't. They just sat and Cath kept her hand under the running tap until the sun dropped low enough in the west to come in on them through the frosted glass of the bathroom window.

'Looks like you've been doing something stupid,' joked Mark, as soon as his head appeared round the bathroom door, on Friday evening.

'Daddy,' Olly squealed and splashed the water invitingly.

Mark stripped off and got in so that Cath was reminded of the way it was when their first baby arrived and Mark was around to be 'Dad'.

'You go,' Mark said, as Cath hesitated in the doorway, 'I'll be fine.'

Cath went out to the kitchen where she tore at a head of Iceberg lettuce and hassled Juliet to get her Grecian helmet off the table.

'Why have you changed from good to bad Mum?' asked Sam as she chivvied him to fetch the plates.

'I'm just in a hurry.' Cath summoned a smile which became a grin as she recalled that Olly had peed in the bath before Mark came home and she'd been too tired to empty the bath and start



again. Mark appeared in the kitchen, on his own.

‘Where's Olly?’ asked Cath. She'd imagined they'd appear together, with Olly all towelled off and dressed in his pyjamas.

Mark had his head in the fridge and didn't reply.

‘Did you get him out?’

‘Hmm?’

‘Mark?’

Silence but for the sound of Mark moving refrigerated items.

‘Is he still in the bath?’ Cath let the head of lettuce fall to the floor and left the room.

Olly was sitting by himself, chest deep in water. Forgetting to kneel or crouch to protect her back, she lifted Olly's soft wet body directly up to her own dry chest and went through to sit, breathless, in the bedroom where she had to navigate a moraine of possessions to get to the bed—books, unsorted papers, two tramping packs, skis, down jackets, boots, poles, plastics, crampons, rope, ice axe...There's no room for a new life here, she thought, until we get rid of all this snow stuff.

‘Phone for you!’ Juliet called and Cath picked it up by the bed.

‘Everything ok?’

Cath let out a gasping laugh and told Jill how she'd scalded her hand on Thursday—about the pain, and perching on the side of the pink bathtub with her hand under the cold tap. She told her how Olly had come to stand beside her, how he started crying in sympathy, how she bought a burn dressing from the chemist, got one of the mums at school to put it on for her, how she's all right now. Now that Mark is home. She stopped talking when she heard herself lying but her brain kept running on: It's like some kind of weird slalom—I'm on skis, maybe on a snow sledge. I'm getting slower and heavier, more and more clumsy and Mark is just another obstacle to be got around...Just as I'm starting to relax there he is popping up again looking for attention while I'm trying to steer a sled full of kids and a pregnant belly round another bloody rock. Why is it when movies play in my head it's always snowing? I'm living in Perth but dreaming Central Otago...Eventually, Cath recalled that Jill was on the other end of the line. ‘Sorry, I missed that—juggling Olly.’

‘I just wanted to call, and wish you all the best.’

‘Don't worry. Olly was a week late.’

‘Full moon tonight,’ Jill proffered a nursing joke. ‘Call me if you need someone to mind the kids.’

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At midnight Cath manoeuvred groggily out of bed and made her way to the bathroom where the security screen had been transformed by the moonlight into a curtain of silver scales. Her pregnant shadow slipped across the bathtub and she sat down heavily on the toilet. When she stood up, she had to pause for a moment to manage contractions. And she recalled Jill's joke about babies arriving faster on the full moon. She moved toward the kitchen to call the Birth Centre.

'Do you have any back pain?' asked the midwife on duty.

'No.'

'You better come straight down. We'll be ready.'

Cath rang off and went about the house packing a bag but she had to stop and brace herself. 'Mark! Ma-ark!' The sensation she'd had earlier, of needing to make an enormous crap, was the baby's head pushing down and Cath realised that she was in second stage labour. She knelt down pushing with her arms against the pink bath tub and reminded herself to breathe. Mark appeared in the doorway looking tired and disorientated.

'Can you line the bath with something?'

'Fuck off. You can't have the baby here.'

'Well what do you suggest?' asked Cath, trying for sarcasm between contractions.

Shocked into practical compliance Mark called an ambulance, lined the bath with towels and helped Cath over the side where she immediately got down on all fours and pushed her bum up in the air.

'What are you doing?'

'Trying to slow it down a bit.'

'Jesus.'

Cath didn't really hear Mark after that. Later, when Jill asked her, she said that he'd gone to mind the kids but she didn't really know...All she knew at the time was the sound of her own breathing and her voice, which came back to her as though from a distance, moaning. Behind her closed eyelids she saw black and then colours—deep red and purple, giving way again to black and then, when she opened her eyes, the walls of the pink bathtub. There was nothing but pain and push and burn but in a far-off part of Cath's mind she could hear a voice hanging back from it all, urging her on: 'Just push. Go on. It's all going to be over in ten minutes.'

Cath couldn't believe her luck after the other three births and a new excitement coursed through her so that when the baby girl slipped out into the hands of an ambulance medic she was laughing and crying all at once. She knew the old-school midwives likened a good birth experience to climbing a mountain but she'd never believed it. Yet, there she was holding her warm wet newborn and feeling as exhilarated as if she were standing on a snowy ridge with the wind in her face.

Jill came to visit them a few days later, armed with a roast chicken dinner and a fruit cake which the kids started on immediately.

‘Where's Mark?’

‘Kal,’ replied Cath, noticing herself use the local moniker.

‘Oh,’ said Jill.

Cath rolled her eyes and passed her the baby so that she could grab the ringing phone. ‘Hi Mark.’ Cath took the phone through to the bathroom and closed the door. ‘Is everything okay?’

‘Yeah.’ There was a pause in which they could each hear each other’s breathing. ‘How would you feel if I went back for a week to do some skiing?’

‘To Queenstown? Now?’

Mark stayed quiet, letting her words wash over him.

‘Well you'd miss out,’ Cath said flatly.

‘On what?’

‘On this, all of it, the kids, the new baby...’

‘But that's your project. You don't need me.’

‘Oh really.’ Later, Cath promised herself, she would go online and research separation and divorce in Australia but at that moment she looked down at the terrazzo floor and said on a held breath, ‘Just, don't tell me...’

‘I'm in Auckland,’ Mark said. ‘I got a direct flight. I'll be in Queenstown by tonight if it doesn't snow—’

Cath cut him off and put the phone down beside the pink basin.

## Tea

She stands and pours out, watches the amber liquid flow into the porcelain mug with a chip on the far side. She pours for her father. Only three quarters, because he took a dollop of milk on top. She's wearing a smart dress today, in honour of the occasion.

She stands and pours out, watches the amber liquid flow into a gold rimmed teacup. Autumn flowers dance on the outside surface. On the inside, tiny dots pockmark the white finish. Mould spores have dug into bone. These cups, a gift to her grandparents, have become a set piece and live in cardboard boxes but for this one day of the year.

She stands and pours out for her mother, her grandmother, her great grandmother. She lifts the pot high and brings it down. Tea waterfalls into cups. Fingers of steam rise.

She stands and pours out. A tall, narrow mug for her grandfather, though he'd always had spirits. She should have planned ahead, brought in supplies, but she had almost forgotten the day. Two tin mugs for her grandfather's friends line up beside his, like the men he went to war with.

She pours again, returns to the stove for more hot water, remembers how her brother used to light his cigarette on the gas ring, and how it was that he died, collapsing on to a lit stove just like this one. Early morning. A heart attack, they said. And no one there.

She stands and pours out, an anniversary cup for her brother who died in the land they thought they'd left. Completely alone, and on fire.

### **December 23**

Lying in the tent under the Peppermint Gums and Blackbutt everything's within reach: reading glasses in one pocket, car keys in the other. Easy. And enough solitude to read two or three chapters before David and the kids come back, looking for lunch.

Though this riverside campground, and its famous swimming hole, were named during WWI for the honeymooners who used to camp here, we seem to enjoy most the way camping gives us time to be alone. This year David bought a family size tent, the sort of indoors-outdoors arrangement that springs up all along the banks of the river over the summer holidays. For some reason I had imagined it would be a family thing, a gathering place for us all. In reality, David views it as 'his tent' to be kept clean and calm and perpetually free of clamouring children. In addition, he is a light sleeper and has recently taken to sleeping by himself.

I initially viewed this new development in our situation with concern, considering the vulnerable state of our middle age marriage: I now realise it gives me all the benefits of the old tent to myself, the free air around me and the two walls within easy reach of my outstretched arms. Just me and my book, in the small space.

On the drive down yesterday, it was thirty-eight degrees outside the car and the road signs blazed at us through the shimmering air: 'Fire Danger Extreme' and 'Camping and Cooking Fires prohibited 3 October – 30 April'. Then, beside a small bridge, I saw another sign: 'Road Subject to Flooding.'

When we pulled off the road for a break and a toilet stop, our youngest began rubbing dust into his T-shirt and shorts. We didn't notice at first—too busy reading about a local historical personage who enjoyed jam sandwiches and said, quote unquote: 'A bucket has to sit on its own arse around here.'

By the time I came back from the store with ice blocks, Jonty was earth coloured all over. 'Like a blob of mud,' he said, blinking at me.

He looked as though he were created from the earth, like Adam and Eve, or an Australian golem, and I realised how quickly he is changing, adapting, becoming Australian, while I'm not.

### **December 24**

The campsite was quiet today. I felt a bit sorry for the young British couple that perched at a picnic table near us to drink bubbly and call home in their elf hats.

Apart from us there are a couple of Israelis and a large party of Jehovah's Witnesses. They don't do Christmas, and although their kids enjoyed our kids messing about on the ukuleles, their pastor was quick to come over and herd them all back to their own site.

Mandy's in her usual spot. She's been camping here for twenty years and says that 'she's not the tinsel and Christmas tree type'. Her kids'll come down to visit her when they're ready.

We've befriended Pania, a young Kiwi woman I met near the toilet block yesterday. She seems to be here on her own with a little baby. When I asked her how long she'd been living in Western Australia she said firmly, 'Australia's been good to me but it's time to go back.'

## **December 25**

Conversation with 11:

'Would you try on the Size 12 swimmers?'

'No.'

'Try them on please.'

'No. I hate them they're too big.'

'The Size 10 is too small.'

'No. It's not.'

'You can try the 12 and if they're too big you can take them off again.'

'No.'

Behind his book, David sipped coffee from a blue plastic camping mug. Behind him, a large grey bird was taking Weet-Bix from our sons' abandoned breakfast bowls, dipping her head, then throwing it back to let the Weet-Bix fall more easily down her long, elegant throat.

I walked away, counting down from ten, wishing that my parents were with us to charm the eleven-year-old into doing what I've asked her.

## **December 26**

We drove into Collie today, had a takeaway lunch at Subway and wandered up the main street so that the kids could spend their pocket money on sweets at the corner shop which is called a 'Deli,' short for 'delicatessen.' A bell rang as we opened the screen door, but there wasn't much delicatessen about it and no bread either.

Jonty is collecting bottle tops this summer and cried out in delight as we wandered back to the car, 'My white horses!' He had just spied the pub sign advertising 'Carlton.'

Kookaburras really do laugh. I watched one for the longest time this afternoon. She seemed to be competing with one of the grey Weet-Bix eating birds. Both of them wanted the pieces of sausage dropped by the family of boys camping next to us. Their Dad, Peter, told me that they're

hoping for a quiet holiday, that they're escapees from Rockingham—infamous for its supersize New Year's Eve parties. Eventually the grey bird flew off and I watched the Kookaburra bash the sausage to death as though it were live prey. After her meal she cleaned her beak on the side of a log and flew up into the Peppermint Gums to watch the river.

### **December 27**

I have just returned from the pool itself. So cold. So deep. The Hazara families we met last year are back again. The women swim fully clothed, wearing dark glasses and coloured plastic floaties round their middles. Their clothing billows and balloons in the water; pink, gold and green, while their long hair floats in wet tendrils out from under their head scarves. I can't help noticing that Safari's husband has horizontal scars across his back, as though he had been whipped, sometime before the fifteen years he has spent in Australia. They've had a baby this year and they've bought into a carpet cleaning business. They are elated. 'Thank God,' she says. 'Thank God.' When I left them, they were going up to Mandy's camp for tea and Jenga. DPAW think they run this camp ground but actually Mandy does.

### **December 28**

The ice in the chilly bin is melting faster than we predicted. And I'm learning to call it an 'esky.' Water pools, and several times a day we move the food around. Other campers, more seasoned than us (like Mandy!) have a huge one. You can buy them in Collie, but no one wants a long hot drive today. Perhaps next year we'll get one of those but for now David says, 'We won't be getting a generator and a fridge otherwise the kids'll want us to bring the TV!'

The forest isn't ever silent. If the people weren't here the birds would see to that. The only truly silent thing in the forest is the ice melting in the chilly bin.

### **December 29**

We were disturbed early this morning by what sounded like gun shots. The noise seemed to be coming from deep inside the park, and it was soon over. Or so we thought. Just as I poured the children more yoghurt to go with their Weet-Bix, and relaxed into my second cup of tea, another volley went off and Jonty, our youngest looked quite alarmed. David told him not to worry, but by then Jonty was distressed and needing the toilet, so the two of them went off while the rest of us tidied up the breakfast things. The noise, startling and unpredictable continued. Who would be shooting in the forest at this time of year?

'Cockatoos!' Jonty shouted as he came running back. 'It's cockatoos!'

We all had to run up to the toilets then to join the small crowd of onlookers who'd gathered, with hands over their ears, to view the Red-Tailed Forest Cockatoos who were camped out in the trees above the toilet block. Like pirates, they swung and cackled and squawked tossing down gum nuts to explode with grenade-like effect on the corrugated iron roof.

Mandy told us later that the Hazara families had been terrified. PTSD we suppose.

### **December 30**

The boys and I went for a walk this morning along the Munda Bididi Trail where we met Piers and Lijah. They were saying that Marama's brothers (the Maori bros from Gosnells) took them down to the river last night with torches and introduced them to the marron, a sort of freshwater crayfish that walks about on the bottom. I've seen a few, far up stream in the daytime but Piers said they saw a whole civilisation last night, just under the deck by the swimming hole.

'Marron,' Piers was told firmly, 'is not pronounced with a long "a" sound to rhyme with "car" or the French "garcon"; marron rhymes with Sharon, a girl's name popular in Australia.' Lijah demonstrated for us, making the accent flat and even across both syllables so that the word disappeared somehow into the corner of his mouth. Marama's brothers obviously had great fun explaining all this to Piers who has a strange, American-sounding accent that I can't place exactly.

Lijah said Piers had no excuse for making this mistake, except that he grew up in Vietnam and the States.

Piers said no actually, his mother spoke French, and taught French, before she and his father left Vietnam. And it was his mother who had insisted, when he started Senior High, that he continue with the language. Alternatively, Piers said, perhaps because it was in a recipe book that he first came across 'Marron' he put a rather more gourmet spin on it than he should have. Piers' mother had once had a large collection of 'Cordon Bleu' magazines and, for him, recipe reading is forever associated with French language acquisition; a new foodie word, like 'marron,' should also sound French, though he acknowledged that the French do not have marron, or yabbies, or even freshwater crayfish for that matter.

I told Piers that David has a colleague back at work in Perth who's French. 'I could ask him,' I said, 'but he's seriously Jewish and probably wouldn't eat a crustacean anyway.'

Lijah thought that was hilarious for some reason. And then he told us all that in Perth the local people call 'marron' 'gilgies' but that's more than likely not the right word to use in the South West.



## December 31

We made an early New Year with the kids at ten o'clock and went to bed overcome by a day out mountain biking and a long cold swim. I was still awake for the midnight countdown but must have dozed off after that because I woke suddenly with the sensation that the ground underneath me and the forest walls were vibrating.

'Thunderstruck' is the only word I can think of that comes close to describing how I felt. The pulse of a souped-up sound system behind us filled the valley with club music, and strobe lights were flashing rhythmically across the tent walls. I lay still, the sound itself pinning me down. In a little while I got up to check on the kids. Unbelievably the boys were asleep, though David was up. He'd done the round of the kids' tents already and was making light of it, pretending he was checking on the guy ropes and so on, but I could see by the whites of his eyes, and the set of his jaw that he wasn't happy. We went together into his big tent where we assumed we would be able to hear each other talk but we couldn't really.

Half an hour later a party of guys headed up the road past us towards the source of the noise and a short time after that everything went quiet. Lijah told us this morning that someone (Lijah?) went up there with a pair of pliers and cut the power cable.

At the time I didn't really follow the end of the music, because shortly after David and I came inside the big tent, there was a fight directly outside. I heard the smack of a fist against someone's face and then:

'Jesus I'm bleeding.'

'Just let him go. Let him go Josh!'

By ten o'clock this morning, a subdued air had fallen over the campsite and sheepish faces began to appear. Overly polite New Year greetings were exchanged, and I found myself trying to match up various voices I had heard in the night with the faces and voices of the new day. Someone had lost their car keys/someone had had an 'esky' full of food stolen/someone else proclaimed they'd been 'blotto.' A group of Swedish tourists spoke in shocked voices of the night's events and family groups, ours among them, determined never to come back at New Years. The Park Ranger just shrugged.

No one but the heaviest drinkers were nonchalant. Peter and Karen and their three boys have gone this morning, feeling like they should have stayed at home. We are wondering who our new neighbours will be.

## January 1

Mandy's just been up to see us about Pania. Her 'scoundrel boyfriend' was supposed to collect her last night in time to take her and the baby back to Bunbury for New Year's Eve, but he didn't turn up here until after midnight.

Pania (I admire her guts) said she wouldn't get in the truck with him because he was too drunk to drive. She even took his keys but he took them back.

'And then he tore away down the road like an idiot,' said Mandy, 'with all Pania's stuff and the baby's gear. Have you any spare supplies?'

David and I struck my single tent, and rustled up half a packet of swim nappies and then I went off with Mandy to see what else Pania might need. I felt awkwardly like a white knight astride one of Jonty's bottle top horses; it was a relief to meet Marama and her brothers further up the road. Marama, it turns out, is a social worker, and sees quite a number of Kiwi women, referred to her by the local women's centre.

Marama's going to drive Pania into town tomorrow but says that unless she's an Australian citizen she won't be entitled to anything from Centrelink.

Another Conversation with 11:

'Go and get your swimmers on so that we can go.'

'I thought we were going for a walk.'

'We are but we will also be wading and swimming.'

'I don't want to go on a dumb walk where I have to wade.'

'Well today you don't have a choice.'

'I don't even want to be here. Why can't we go back home?'

'Because we're camping.'

'I hate camping. I hate this whole dumb forest! And I hate Australia!'

I lost my temper then and told my daughter that hers were 'first world' problems. The boys just told her she was missing out and went off to float down the river on their inner tubes.

Cottesloe

**January 26, 2016**

*Cottesloe, 6.30am. A handful of surfers are paddling out behind the break, and at the water's edge stand one hundred young women. Where the surf lifesaving pennants should be there is a row of red and black flags, centred with a yellow sun. This is the flag of Australia's First Nations' people and today is Australia Day.*

The Spanish language news bounces off the sunlit walls as Estrella's father pours himself a first cup of coffee. Umberto takes it black.

Vera, already curled into a corner of the sofa, waves a lazy hand at him.

*With a high of 37 predicted for Australia Day in Perth, this beach will soon be crowded, yet across Australia Indigenous people and human rights groups are calling on the government to change the date of the national holiday. Is it still appropriate to celebrate the first planting of the British flag on Australian soil with a beach day, barbeque and fireworks?*

'May as well burn money.'

'Ssh...

*I spoke with some of the girls who have gathered on the beach this morning to mark Australia Day a little differently.*

*What are you doing here this morning Estrella?*

'What the—'

'Listen. She's speaking Spanish.'

As soon as they're on the bus Estrella asks Jules what she's doing for the twenty-sixth of January.

'Skyworks and a barbie,' Jules grins.

'We could do something else.'

'Like what?'

'Something to raise money for indigenous women and girls.'

Jules is silent.

'Or indigenous literacy, or—'

'Oh my god Stella. The school community service program just colonised your mouth.'

'School will be over, so no one's getting brownie points.'

The two girls lapse into silence, each turning to the solitude of their Spotify playlist, but the following weekend at the mall, slurping on smoothies, and surrounded by half of Morley looking to beat the heat, Estrella starts up again, 'What about an ice bucket challenge?'

'What about it?' says Jules, barely lifting her eyes from her Pinetastic Mango.

‘It’s got all the right ingredients,’ says Estrella, checking them off on her fingers, ‘quick and easy, online presence, fun.’

Zahra doesn’t say anything but anticipates the sound of it. She imagines a red plastic bucket being lifted above her. She knows there will be the splat of water and the clatter of ice hitting concrete, but she’s unable to imagine how cold it will be, beyond cold. Very, very cold. Every millimetre of her skin strains away from the thought of that bucket, its handle bending ominously under the weight.

‘A bit Hollywood,’ says Jules, and Zahra, relieved, raises her Blueberry Blast with a smile.

‘What do you mean?’ asks Estrella.

‘Like, it’s more about showing off than doing something for charity.’

‘Some celebrities even forgot to ask for donations,’ Zahra chimes in.

‘And then there’s the water,’ continues Jules mischievously, consulting her phone. ‘There was a drought in California, but they reckon five million gallons of water were wasted—’

Estrella and Phuong make loud sucking noises at the bottom of their Wondermelons, drowning Jules out.

‘Gross,’ says Zahra.

‘There’s only four of us,’ says Phuong reasonably, prising off the lid of her smoothie and taking out the straw.

‘But the plan *is* to challenge people online, isn’t it?’ asks Zahra.

‘So...?’ Phuong licks her straw with a flourish. ‘We’ll do it at the beach and use salt water.’

‘Let’s aim for a hundred girls,’ says Estrella.

‘On the day?’ asks Zahra.

‘Why not? We can put it up on Twitter. Like a flash mob.’

‘What about our parents?’

‘Well, mine gave up on me being an Asian Princess when I asked them to stop driving me to school in Year 8,’ says Phuong.

Jules, whose Kiwi parents are separated, is equally forthright—

‘Dad says Australia’s the land of pay up, put up and shut up, that Mum’s too conservative, and that I have to make up my own mind so... count me in. I can help organise too, but I better get going or I’ll be late for Muffin Break.’

‘Our loss is their gain,’ says Phuong, winking at Jules.

‘Don’t be stupid. I told you the cute guy isn’t there anymore,’

‘Bye.’

‘What about you Zahra?’

‘I really like the idea, but Mo’s waiting for me downstairs.’

Phuong stands, 'Come. We'll walk with you.'

Once Zahra has gone Phuong and Estrella make their way towards K-Mart where Estrella's shift is starting.

'When will her brother stop driving her?' Estrella asks Phuong.

'Never.'

Mo's Toyota looks tidy enough from the outside, aside from the hail damage, but the upholstery is worn, even ripped in places. Mo has mended it carefully with duct tape. Zahra gets in, pulls the door closed too hard as always, and plonks herself down on the blue bath towel Mo leaves folded over the seat for her. She got her first period in his car, suddenly and messily; Mo thought she would bleed to death, Zahra thought his car would be ruined. She smiles across at him now, 'Thanks Bra.'

'Don't thank me, thank your mother,' he says and pulls out into the traffic.

The way he sits, a tall upright rectangle in the driver's seat, makes him look older than he is. 'A solid citizen', Jules would say. Zahra laughs, and Mo looks over at her.

'What's up Zahs?'

'Nothing.'

Zahra looks out the window at Walter Road: blocks of smaller shops, each with a fish and chips, takeaway, or kebab place, end-stopped by traffic lights, and backed by brick and tile homes. Lawns look tired. Some have been paved over for an extra car park, or replaced with pebbles, to cut down on watering costs. Zahra is glad to be sitting in Mo's car with the air-con cranked up high, instead of waiting for a bus in the heat. He brakes suddenly at the Bedford Street lights and Zahra's thrown forward.

'Shit!' Mo throws his arm across her. 'Shit.'

'I'm okay. It's alright.' Zahra says, breathing the cool air-conditioned air.

They wait for the lights to change.

'You can make up time if you cut through the swimming pool car park.'

'Gotta get our money back on those swimming lessons somehow.'

'Not just a pretty face.'

For a moment Zahra thinks she'll tell him about their Australia Day plan, but she knows that if she mentions the beach—her doing an ice bucket challenge there in her burkhini, the possibility of media coverage—there will be an argument. He will accuse her of 'skipping the faith' to 'swim practically naked' as he did once when she was invited to a pool party at Jules's place. In the end Zahra had been allowed to go, providing that she did not swim, and that she was ready to leave when Mo came to collect her at four.

Mo?'

‘Yeah?’

‘What are we doing for Australia Day?’

‘There’s that family from Katanning. Mum and Dad know them from before.’

Zahra groans, ‘And they’ve got three sons.’

‘But no daughters,’ says Mo, flashing her a grin.

Estrella watches Vera’s hands as they measure out the fertiliser, one cup of liquid for each of the bright green lettuces, then a quick dig around with a hand fork to help it soak in. When she was younger, Estrella used to trail around after her mother for ages, plying her with questions, and fetching the secateurs, or a box for weeds. These days they’re hardly ever in the garden at the same time.

Early morning light plays amongst the greens, and a row of chillies flash red from the old pots lined up against the asbestos fence. There’s not much left in the garden this time of year. The last lettuces are only saved from bolting to seed by Vera’s careful ministrations, and the shade cast by the avocado and lime trees. Estrella waggles her toes on the concrete path. It’s already heating up. ‘Smells good out here.’

‘Best part of the day.’

Pablo rubs himself against Estrella’s bare legs, and she bends over to rake her fingers down his back. He arches towards her hand, and adjusts the angle of his lifted chin, proffering his bib for attention. Already Umberto has pegged the laundry: Estrella’s school polos, his work shirts, and Mum’s uniforms on the outside; the bras and underwear in the middle. Estrella moves to stand among the laundry’s damp folds, luxuriating in their cooler air. Dad insists on keeping the Hills Hoist, even though everyone Estrella knows has a rack down the side of the house. ‘Not enough space’, Dad always says and: ‘Why should I stand in a hot alley when I can be in my garden?’

‘You can open the fresh bread from the bakery if you like.’

‘I’m not hungry yet.’

Vera straightens up and looks at her daughter with a smile and a cocked eyebrow.

‘What?’ Estrella is defensive, then plays at innocence raising her hands and sending the palms towards her mother, before letting out a laugh.

‘Okay, I’ve got a problem. Channel 9 and the Spanish news want to cover our Australia Day challenge.’

‘How’s that a problem?’

‘I still haven’t told Dad.’

Vera turns on the tap, fills the watering can, and moves to water the fertiliser in.

‘Maybe you won’t,’ she says.

Estrella watches her mother's shoulders tilt unevenly with the heft of watering.

'Don't I have to?'

'There's no "have to" but he is your father.' Vera passes the watering can to her daughter.

As she does so a few stray drops fall on Pablo. He shakes himself off and marches away.

'Whoosy Puss,' says Estrella.

'Finish these for me, would you? I'm going to hit the kitchen.'

'Mum?'

'Yeah.'

'Don't say anything to Dad.'

Estrella is listening to a Stan Grant podcast, when she's interrupted by Jules on Instagram:

you still ok to bring cheesecake?

yup

ice?

all good

and your still in?

course☺Im driving and how else will I bring the ice and the cheesecake?

great☺Zahras keen too

yeah

btw don't think her parents know

duh! Shes coming to me and were coming to you b ready at 5.30

K c u then.

OMG cant believe this is actually happening

Me too

Nite

XX

Estrella wakes in the early morning light before her alarm goes off. Pablo, curled on the bed, has forced her feet over to one side and outside the window there's a butcher bird in full voice. She reaches over to check her phone. 4.30am. She turns off the alarm before it can wake her parents, and wriggles into her clothes.

'Sorry I'm late.'

'No worries,' says Jules, chucking her stuff in the back seat.

'Where's Zahra?'

‘No show.’

‘Did she—’

‘Haven’t heard.’

‘Okay,’ says Jules, belting up. ‘Let’s do this thing.’

Phuong is waiting for them out front and jumps in as soon as Estrella pulls up. It feels crowded now, and Phuong is restless in the back seat. Estrella puts her foot down. The road lies empty before her and she drives towards the coast with the sun rising at her back.

The car park is already filling up when the girls arrive, and Estrella turns carefully into the last spot. Later in the day there will be hats and cars and beach towels adorned with the Australian flag and boys with sun baked shoulders drinking on the grass. There will be grandparents putting a sausage, or steak, or prawns on the barbie and kids playing frisbee or soccer or begging for one last swim before they head back to the car. There’ll be hot dads letting all the windows down. There’ll be ice creams dropped on hot bitumen where they’ll melt like sweaty rainbows and there’ll be tears and arguments and toddlers asleep in their car seats covered in sand. But for now, just for a moment, Estrella sits in the driver’s seat and looks out to the horizon.

The others are already unloading and, as they walk across to the beach, they pass a team of volunteers setting up a fundraising breakfast. Estrella’s stomach growls, anticipating the smell of bacon and eggs and sausages.

‘I’m a getting hungry,’ says Phuong.

‘Me too,’ laughs Jules.

When they get a clear view of the sand all thoughts of breakfast evaporate. The beach is dotted as usual with beach towels and bundled sun shelters, but everyone is at the water’s edge. Clusters of girls with buckets and ice-filled eskys and Aboriginal flags have made their way down the path before them and are setting up near the waves. There are enough girls assembled already to fill all the available spaces between the pavilion and the shark net. New arrivals are heading North. Estrella turns sharply to follow them when Phuong stops her.

‘You’ll need to take a middle spot Estrella, or the media won’t find you.’

Jules and Estrella bump the esky down.

‘OMG’ says Estella. ‘We’re really in it.’

‘Yes!’ says Jules, grinning at her, ‘yes. We are.’



The TV screen is alive with Estrella, Jules and Phuong, their hair wet, their faces glowing. Vera sits forward. Now Phuong is rescuing a bucket from the waves like a five-year-old. Now Vera remembers taking the girls to netball, the air shining with fourteen futures as they pounded up and down the court on a Wednesday afternoon. Hooray for these girls she thinks. Hooray! Hooray! Now the girls are holding up an Aboriginal flag. Now Umberto comes to stand behind her with his coffee, and Estrella is fronting the camera in Spanish:

*We were at a music festival and a Nyoongar speaker challenged us to do something different for Australia Day.*

*- Do you remember what he said?*

*Yes. I do. He said: Where are you from? Where did your ancestors live before they came to Wadjak Nyoongar Boodjar? I'm really interested to know. I'm interested to hear your music and your stories.*

*If people had sat together like you young fellas have done this weekend playing music and yarnning—if there'd been a bit more of that back at the beginning there'd be a bit more understanding between my mob and all of you fellas. And a bit more understanding as to why the First Nations people want something more from Australia Day than fireworks and a barbie.*

At the end of the item a tele-text message runs along the bottom of the screen, inviting viewer donations.

Umberto picks up the remote and the screen goes black.

Pablo is waiting on the front step when Estrella comes home and he trills a soliciting purr in her direction. She tickles the top of his head, unlocks the door, and drops her gear in a heap on the rug before going to the fridge.

'Hello,' she calls out as she pours herself a tall glass of ice water.

'Like you haven't seen enough of that today,' says Vera coming in through the back door.

Estrella turns to face her and grins, 'Did you see us on TV?'

'Oh yeah,' says Vera, dropping the laundry basket and drawing her daughter close. 'You were terrific.'

'And we brought in heaps of donations. We're all over socials.' Estrella finishes her first glass of water and pours herself a second one. 'Where's Dad?'

'Out.'

'Out? Where? Is everything ok?'

'It will be.'

Vera takes the basket through to the lounge where she dumps the contents out on the sofa. Pablo promptly jumps up and starts kneading himself a nest among the clothes.

‘Hop off you,’ says Vera, shoving Pablo aside so that she can get to her blue work smock.

‘Is he mad at me?’

Vera gives the smock a shake, and a bee flies out over their heads.

‘Watch out.’

‘What then?’

‘He just—*We* just have to accept that you’re more Australia than Chile.’

Pablo jumps up on the windowsill to paw at the bee that’s buzzing vigorously against the glass.

‘Don’t touch that,’ says Estrella, dropping Pablo onto the floor with a thump. ‘So...if I’d been making rice and beans for the Latin America Solidarity Committee fundraiser that would’ve been okay?’

‘Yes. The solidarity community is our community. And we never made it on TV in our bathers.’

‘Seriously?’ Estrella is trying not to glare at her mother when she sees the bee drift across the room and land on her father’s first ever custom-made rego, ‘C-H-I-L-E’. It used to hang above the car port, but when the car port was re-stumped last winter it came inside.

‘I was joking about the bathers, but your Dad thought it was a bit much.’

‘Mum!’

‘Don’t Mum me,’ says Vera, lifting the bee up gently on an envelope and flipping it outside. ‘You asked me what upset your Dad, and I’m telling you.’

‘Look. Forget about the bathers. Dad taught me to stand up for what’s right. That’s what we did today.’

‘You did, and I’m proud of you,’ says Vera closing the screen door. ‘But there’s a part of your Dad that sees you growing up, and growing away from him—Your Dad’s been through a lot, seen a lot. He wants to protect you.’

‘Protect his reputation more like.’

‘Estrella!’

‘It’s got nothing to do with him. Australia’s not Chile Mum.’

## **June 2020.**

The wind’s up at the beach and the girls are glad to sit with their backs against the concrete wall, soaking up the warmth that lingers there. They don’t get together as much these days. With the pressure of Uni, and part-time jobs, their lives aren’t in synch the way they used to be, but it’s

Zahra's birthday, and after a long COVID semester studying online they're celebrating face to face with cheesecake at the beach.

It's not the backdrop the girls were hoping for. A ridge of seaweed mountains extends from the base of the stepped terraces to the edge of the Indian Ocean, and the Cottesloe pavilion looks more than ever like a colonial relic; a prim white lady lifting her skirts up out of the way. Cottesloe beach has been blacked out. Mounds of oily looking kelp thrown up by the winter tides cover the sand in both directions along the coast.

'Come on Zahra. Never mind the beach, we'll take a selfie instead,' says Phuong. 'Put your hand up Jules.'

'Not now Jules,' says Estrella.

'Oof. That seaweed stinks,' says Zahra.

'Now?'' asks Jules.

'Now!' says Phuong.

And there they are, all rugged up against the onshore wind, smiling back at themselves from Estrella's phone. All of them. Smiling.

## APPENDIX TO CREATIVE WORK:

### Say World

Mum slashes the top off her egg, cleanly. This is something she learned from my grandfather—the man who introduced me to Kenneth McKellar and taught me how to fire an air rifle. Boiled eggs bring out the war stories in my mother.

‘Before we left Scotland your Granny and I used to share an egg between us...’

I know this one. Because of the war there was rationing, and fathers away in Egypt and women and girls sitting at home sharing an egg between them. In my mind, I draw Mum and Granny sitting as stick figures at a wooden table on top of a globe of the world. They are still in Scotland. New Zealand is at the bottom of the map. After the top is off, Mum scoops out the white with a spoon and dips it in the little pool of salt and pepper at the side of her plate. The picture in my mind changes. The globe and the table swivel around until New Zealand is at the top and three heads bend over three eggs at the breakfast table.

‘We thought New Zealand was wonderful,’ Mum continues, her spoon dipping and scooping so that the yolk breaks and spills over the rim. ‘Milk by the pint, butter by the pound, and plenty over for baking.’

Despite my grandfather’s safe return from the War this is still the girls’ story and Mum conjures all the domestic details— flour scattered like stars across the wooden bench, cubes of yellow butter, the quick wisdom of Granny’s scone-making fingers and the smell of her tartan coloured biscuit tin (always full of New Year shortbread).

Later—after I learned to cut the top off my own egg, and to scatter and weigh and bake scones, and after I stood beside Granny and Grandpa’s graves on Christmas Day at Aramaho, and after I married a good First-Foot-looking man and moved to Western Australia—I looked back and realised that those warm kitchen memories were only half the story.

My grandfather used to sing Kenneth McKellar at the drop of a hat. Old friends and family always said he was ‘a bit of a Joker’, but they didn't mean it in the way that Kiwis or Australians do. Grandpa was just a very happy sort. And he taught me to fire an air rifle. It was the same day I asked him what it felt like to move to New Zealand. He didn't talk about himself.

‘When we came to New Zealand your mother had a hard job settling in.’

Those were his words. My grandfather's words. And then he showed me how to line up a shot, pull the trigger and send a pellet pinging into the target. I was a good shot and anything else Grandpa might have said that day was eclipsed by his excitement at my beginners luck. Kenneth McKellar favourites echoed impressively around the garden for the rest of the morning until Mum

and Granny told him off.

‘For goodness sake pipe down Jock!’

It was Marjorie who told me what really happened.

Marjorie was Mum’s best friend through High School, University and Teacher's College. Knowing what I know now I understand that it was a relationship built on mutually recognised outsider status. I know this because when I moved to Perth—already Marjorie’s home for a decade—she and I met every year for a pre-Christmas tea at Myers. The year after Mum’s death, I brought her my first baby asleep in the car seat. Marjorie rose like a queen, kissed us both and thrust a small bottle of Scotch into my spare hand. This I interpreted as a congratulatory gift, as Marjorie's sense of feminist propriety precluded her giving me chocolate or flowers. Adding a wee dram to our tea in Myers delighted both of us.

When Marjorie met her at Southland Girls, Mum was a small round Third Former with thick glasses, thick plaits and a thick Scottish brogue. Marjorie had a brainy reputation from primary school, and Mum was fresh off the boat, so it was entirely natural that they gravitate towards each other. In studious situations—French and English—they became friendly rivals and in social ones they paired up with each other because no one else wanted to.

So, Marjorie and Mum paired up for Cooking and the day came for milk desserts. Miss McCleary, a tall woman with a large but finely shaped nose, looked down on her girls with approval as they worked quietly in pairs moving smoothly from sink to stove to work bench and back again. Half an hour into the lesson most groups had a double boiler ready on the stove and the milky-eggy mixture was beginning to thicken into custard.

‘We were the only fly in her ointment.’ said Marjorie, ‘Neither your mother nor I could crack an egg to save ourselves.’ So, Miss McCleary went back and forth instructing the hapless pair until it seemed as if ‘everyone was looking at us.’

A little later Miss McCleary left the room.

The winter sun was shining in on the class by now. Warm custardy condensation streamed down the inside of the windowpanes. The girls were hot and itchy in their woollen tights—restive and revolting. As Mum and Marjorie worked sluggishly to tidy their area, they felt a sibilance run around the class—heard a practiced chant:

Fat Scottish brat.

She looks like a cat.

Pull out her whiskers

and send her back.

Next thing Mum and Marjorie were surrounded, pinned between their workbench and the sink.

Mum looked to Marjorie for support and Marjorie looked to her, neither knowing what would happen next. ‘Margaret,’ my mother’s given name turned easily into ‘Maggot.’

‘Go on Maggot. Say world,’ they taunted, waiting for the rolling ‘r’.

‘Say worrrr-ld.’

But Mum said nothing. And that’s when it happened.

In one fluid motion the girls tipped a bowl of warm custard over Mum’s head so that she stood with the slimy milk pudding soaking into her uniform and oozing down behind her ears.

‘Not one Scottish syllable escaped her lips,’ said Marjorie, and I laughed with her about my mother’s stubborn streak, though I felt like crying.

In that part of her life that she shared with me, I only ever heard my mother's brogue when she spoke on the phone to Granny and Grandpa. At these times my sisters and I would gather around her in fascination, sensing perhaps that this was the closest we would ever come to knowing who she was, before she became our mother. After she hung up the phone, we would try to persuade her to ‘speak Scottish—just for us,’ but she never did.

## MARGIN / PERIPHERY / THRESHOLD: CONTEMPORARY SHORT FICTION AND THE MIGRANT EXPERIENCE

Introduction: On Carrying a New Zealand Passport

This PhD, conducted on the principles of practise-led research (Dean & Smith, 2009), addresses the question: How might a migrant writer employ the short story form to represent the complexity of migrant experience in Australia since 1945?

*Trace*, the creative component of the PhD, is a collection of short stories which explore selected moments in the immigration history of Western Australia. The sixteen interlinked stories represent diverse migrant voices—Irish, Maori, Chinese-Malaysian, Cornish, Afghan, Jewish, Scottish, Dutch and Pakeha—within a loose structure informed by notions of autofiction and historiographic metafiction. The complementary exegesis investigates selected short story collections published by migrant writers in Australia since 1945: Mena Abdullah and Ray Mathew's *The Time of the Peacock* (1965); Elizabeth Jolley's *Five Acre Virgin* (1976) and *The Travelling Entertainer* (1979); and Nam Le's *The Boat* (2008).

From the 1970s until the late twentieth century critics and scholars have read Australian migrant writing through a multicultural lens, characterised by an assumed Anglo-Celtic/Migrant binary. This PhD aims to read and write migrant fiction beyond the binary by unsettling the categories Anglo-Celtic and Migrant, as they have been constructed within the field of Australian literary criticism. Both the reading and writing of text are here undertaken with reference to my own term, under-storey, a non-hierarchical metaphor for describing the plurality of story. The concept is derived from a southern hemisphere sense of place and allows for a wider (and wilder) array of metaphors for describing stories and storymaking practice (Metta, 2017). The concept of under-storey owes much to postmodern approaches to history and literary studies, in particular to Deleuze and Guattari (1987). Within the metaphorical context provided by under-storey, theories of hybridity (Bhaba, 1994; Mishra, 1999; Goldberg, 2000; Hall, 2000; Ang, 2001; Ali, 2007; Metta, 2017), historiographic metafiction (White, 1973; Hutcheon, 1988) and autofiction (E. Jones, 2009; Mortimer, 2009; Ferreira-Meyers, 2019) inform both the creative and exegetical components of this PhD.

The definition of 'migrant' utilised for the purpose of selecting 'migrant' works for this study has been predicated on the proximity of the writer to the immigrant experience, as in the 2016 Australian Census [ABS] information pertaining to the number of Australians "born overseas, or who have one or more parents born overseas" (ABS, 2017). I have selected this definition as I am primarily concerned with the psychological process of negotiating Australia, with the duality attendant upon being identifiably other. Whether you are a New Zealander, a Malaysian born Chinese, a Hazara, or

a Jew of German origin, it is not only the individual who arrives from overseas that must negotiate multiple subjectivities daily, but those they entrust with their heritage—the third culture kids who are bound to live one life inside the home/community, and another outside the home/community. The writers whose short story collections have been selected for study were either born overseas or have one parent born overseas. Similarly, key characters in the short story collection, *Trace*, have been constructed on the same principle—they are either migrants themselves, or have a proximity to that experience because at least one of their parents was born overseas. They are expected, by their parents, to become Australian in some ways, but not in others.

The first section of this Introduction, “On Carrying a New Zealand Passport”, draws attention to my own socio-cultural location as a migrant woman writer from Aotearoa/New Zealand living a Jewish life on Nyoongar country (the southwest of Western Australia). Acknowledging my own subjectivity in this way will provide the reader with insight into the reasons why I chose to research migrant short fiction in the first place and help to make my speaking position clear: “in order not to be authoritative, I’ve got to speak autobiographically” (Hall, 1992, p. 277).



“You’re travelling on a New Zealand passport,” said the Customs Official as I returned to Perth from overseas.

“Yes.” I smiled nervously as he distracted me from supervising the three children, who were tired and unpredictable after the flight.

“But I see that you are an Australian citizen.”

“Yes.”

“Do yourself a favour and travel on an Australian passport next time,” he said, banging the offending document on the desk. “On you go.”

Such an obvious statement of distaste towards my assertion of New Zealand heritage is rare, but it points to an ongoing ambivalence within Australia towards those of dual nationality, even apparently White English-speaking Kiwis. On the basis of outward appearance, I am a White Australian. Why don’t I carry an Australian passport?

In his recent book *Not Quite Australian: How Temporary Migration is Changing the Nation* (2016) Peter Mares writes that “New Zealand born people comprise the second largest overseas-born group in Australia” (p. 130). In 2015 there were 654,000 of us living here (Mares, 2016, p. 128), many on temporary visas. Mining boom arrivals from New Zealand, such as we were, bore the brunt of changes made to Australia’s immigration laws in 2001. It was only by seeking an employer to sponsor my husband, or myself, that our family could obtain permanent residence in Australia and, eventually, citizenship. Fifteen years after immigrating to Western Australia I still feel sometimes that I am more an ex-pat New Zealander than an Australian. How do New Zealanders fit into Australia? Are we family, as Peter Mares suggests initially, or are we migrants? (2016, 134-179) Why am I so ambivalent about swapping my New Zealand passport for an Australian one, even now that I am entitled to do so?

Commenting on the position of White English-speaking writers in Australia in 2011, Ingrid van Teesling, a researcher at Wollongong University, noted that, within the multicultural paradigm which has dominated the Australian public sphere since the 1970s, writers are cast as either ‘Anglo-Celtic’ or ‘Migrant’ (van Teesling, 2011, 49-50). Thus, White English-speaking immigrants like myself are positioned within the ‘White’ core and are expected to fit right in, not to continue carrying a foreign passport.

During 2017, as I began drafting this section of the exegesis, the complex dance between individual cultural identity and loyalty to the nation state of Australia became front page news. From late June 2017, a plethora of senators and members of parliament were forced to step down from their political duties while their status as dual citizens or foreign nationals was investigated under Section

44 of the Constitution, which disallows an Australian with dual nationality from holding political office (Marshallsea, 2017).

That so many of our political representatives were drawn into the debacle only emphasises the significance of this issue for Australians, an estimated 49% of whom were born overseas or had at least one parent born overseas on census night 2016 (ABS, 2017). Of course, with one parent born in another country, neither New Zealand or Australia, and being Jewish with the right to make a permanent move to Israel, I'm entitled to four passports. So, who am I really?

When I was a child, my Scottish mother often said—"being born in a hen house doesn't make you a hen." And she was right of course. My first pet was a tiny black kitten with a white bib and white front paws; Mitten, as we named her, had been born in a henhouse, but even my two-year old self could see that she was "not a hen." What my Mother didn't factor in was my postcolonial propensity for acquiring multiple subjectivities.

Born in 1965 to an itinerant teacher contracted to work in Aotearoa/New Zealand's isolated farming and mining communities, I was functionally a stranger wherever I lived until the age of ten, when my family settled in Christchurch. I attended five different primary schools. Adding another layer to my strangeness but providing us with a strong cultural identity at the same time was my mother's Scottish background.

Janice Knox Lockie was a migrant, one of the thousands of post-war immigrants that came to Aotearoa/New Zealand from the United Kingdom after World War II. My mother arrived in Auckland at the age of seven from clannish Howick. In this strange new country at the bottom of the world, to which they had dispersed, my mother's parents and others like them sought the company of fellow Scots—people they had met on the boat coming out or other recent arrivals. I can only guess the number of glasses of fizzy lemonade I drank while sitting as a grandchild among them. From babyhood we understood the thickest Scottish brogue, wore kilts for best, celebrated Hogmanay and learned to take our place in a Scottish country dance set. My mother and her family encouraged us in every way to identify primarily as Scots.

My father, Aubrey John William Stevenson, was a Pākehā (white New Zealander) in so far as his Scottish and Irish forbears had made it to Aotearoa/New Zealand two generations earlier than my mother's. On my paternal grandmother's side, the family came from the South of Ireland and brought with them a love of music. Despite impoverished circumstances, everyone in the family seems to have pursued music, whether as a singer or an instrumentalist. On his father's side, Dad's family were from the Orkneys. Once dispersed to New Zealand, the men of the family worked largely as Presbyterian Ministers, and my father too became a Minister of the Presbyterian Church in later life. Perhaps if my parents had stayed on in Dunedin, Aotearoa/New Zealand's 'Little Edinburgh,' I would have grown up with less sense of ambiguity: Scottish cultural tradition on one side, Scottish religious

tradition on the other. As it was my father began his country service, teaching in rural farming and mining communities, when I was six months old.

Recollecting her British wartime childhood as the German speaking offspring of an Austrian mother and an English father, Elizabeth Jolley alludes to George Eliot, in an attempt to explain the way in which communities, that provide a comfortable place for members, cause non-members to feel, very strongly, their non-belonging:

Opinions were those of George Eliot's villagers: "In that far off time superstition clung easily round every person or thing that was at all unwonted...and how was a man to be explained unless you at least knew somebody who knew his father and mother?" (Jolley, 1977, p. 130)

I remember feeling this burden of strangeness most clearly during the last posting, Blackball (1972-75). There was no Scottish Country Dance club nearby and no Presbyterian church either, although a Minister was despatched monthly for our benefit and that of the only other Scottish family there. In order to connect with the meagre Scottish Country Dance community on the West Coast, my mother would drive for miles at night much to the incredulity of the locals with whom she never became close. When my school friends dropped in during a prolonged visit from my mother's parents, they would say, "I can't understand them. What language are they speaking?" and, from time to time, faced with our wanting to do something "because everyone else does", my mother would say with absolute finality: "Being born in a hen house doesn't make you a hen." As I neared adolescence, I increasingly sensed the tension between my Scottish family and the world around me. Meantime, the nation was undergoing major transformation.

Between my birth in 1965 and my graduation from High School in 1983, Aotearoa/New Zealand cast off its image as an outpost of the British Commonwealth and became a vibrant bicultural country with a strong sense of itself as a Pacific nation. While I was studying The Moa Hunter Māori in primary school, as though Māori civilisation belonged to the ancient past, Māori were, in reality, emerging as a political force to be reckoned with. New Zealand politics were effectively reshaped by increased Māori urbanisation (King, 2003, 472-474), the land protests of the 1970s (King, 481-483), and the Springbok tour of 1981. The Waitangi Tribunal was established in 1975 (King, 2003, 484); by 1986 Māori was an official language; and in 1995 Queen Elizabeth apologised to the Tainui people for the invasion of the Waikato and confiscation of their lands. Tainui and Ngai Tahu received the first Raupatu (land confiscation) settlements valued at \$170 million (King, 2001, 116; King 2003, 497) and promptly began ploughing money into a mixture of business development and social service delivery projects based on a "by Māori for Māori" model. In the case of Tainui, these included a now

internationally famous investment in Māori education at every level from Kōhanga Reo to Whare Wānanga (Māori Language Nests at kindergarten level to Houses of Learning, some of which are now incorporated into the NZ university system).

My family was very supportive of the transition towards biculturalism. My father, by then a leader in primary school education in the eastern suburbs of Christchurch, participated strongly in the drive to incorporate Māori language into the mainstream primary curriculum. Furthermore, Aranui High School, the public school my parents sent me to, had an active Kapa Haka Club, and was one of the first schools in the country to embed Māori language into the curriculum for School Certificate<sup>17</sup>. Unfortunately, I was not a student of Te Reo at that time. My mother was a product of a Scots inflected girls' school and trained as a French and German teacher, so I was encouraged to study French. However, as an adult and community theatre practitioner I learned basic Māori and became actively involved in bicultural theatre projects. Over time, and in common with many non-Māori arts workers, I concluded that such projects were best driven by Māori, rather than Pākehā cultural workers, however well meaning.

By the time I emigrated from Aotearoa/New Zealand in 2005 my sense of self was burgeoning in new directions as I met and, following conversion, married my Jewish husband; birthed children, and committed my spare time to Jewish community life. Eventually we moved to Australia seeking a larger Jewish community.

As a new Australian, I carry Scottish and Pākehā (White New Zealander) cultural baggage, subscribe to a bicultural ethos, and identify additionally as a woman, and as a New Zealand Jew. I carry a New Zealand passport because my multiple identities were forged there—first through ethnic and cultural inheritance, secondly through shared history, thirdly through membership of a minority religious community.

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In this age of trans-national migration no one is purely one thing. Labels like Indian, or woman, or Muslim, or American are no more than starting points, which if followed into experience for only a moment are quickly left behind.  
(Said, 1993, p. 407)

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<sup>17</sup> School Certificate (School C) was the exam we took in the fifth form at age fifteen.

Thus renowned post-colonial theorist Edward Said made the case for our having multiple subjectivities, asserting that since the major population migrations of the post-war period we each occupy more and more subject positions. As I noted earlier, according to the 2016 Census, nearly half (49%) of Australians had either been born overseas (first generation Australian) or had at least one parent born overseas (second generation). Being a migrant/being born of migrants and negotiating more than one ethnic/cultural identity is therefore a fact of life for almost half the Australian population. Maybe becoming Australian means acknowledging that almost half of us potentially share this sense of strangeness and unbelonging, and that we can transform it into a powerful and fluid way of being. Perhaps then I should give up longing to belong and instead mobilise my hybridity (Ang, 2009) as a scholarly and creative asset, as Ien Ang suggests:

Where parochial research and writing tends to take its own self-positioning for granted as self-explanatory, research and writing from a hybrid perspective always has to establish itself relationally, articulating a shifting multiplicity of standpoints that are put into dialogue with one another to bring about a more multifaceted understanding of the world. (Ang, 2009, p. 26)

Paola Totaro, an Australian journalist who immigrated to Australia from Italy when she was four years old, takes a similar view. Asked to reflect on her dual heritage for an anthology of essays about migrant life in Australia, she quoted Martin Krygier's 1997 Boyer lectures, *Between Fear and Hope: Hybrid Thought on Public Values*, in which he gestured to Edward Said's notion of hybridity and 'the third space.'

That metaphysical space is simultaneously inside and outside the cultures in which they were raised, in which they live, of which they are part and which are part of them [...] More generally it can offer a powerful antidote to parochialism, which has, perhaps, cosy charms as a way of life but is not much help in understanding or evaluating a way of life. (Krygier as cited in Totaro, 2013, p.74)

In concluding her essay, Totaro wrote: 'I've started to understand how powerful growing up in Australia has been for me, and that perhaps it is being neither Italian nor Australian that has truly shaped who I am.' (2013, p.5)

Marilyn Metta, an Australian academic who immigrated to Australia from Malaysia writes about her transformation of unbelonging in this way:

It is through my journey of unbelonging that I have created and invented my hybridity. In unbelonging, I seek to create alternative identities that shift with my environments and allow me to exist and flourish within foreign spaces and places... (Metta, 2010, p. 110)

Outside of academia, Najaf Mazari, an Australian writer who identifies primarily as a Hazara from Afghanistan, describes his hybridity as he enacts it on a daily basis:

I have described myself to people who are not of my tribe in this way and that, and usually I satisfy the person I'm talking to, and also satisfy myself, up to a point. I say, "I am a pacifist," and so place myself in a very large tribe of people who share at least one belief with me. Or I say, "I am a businessman," and the banker I am addressing knows that I can be relied on to keep an accurate account of what I buy and sell; that I make sensible decisions with my money. I say "I am a Muslim," and the Muslim listening to me will make a dozen assumptions about the life I lead, most of them correct. When I meet a Hazara, I don't say "Nice to meet you. I am Hazara." There is no need. We will greet each other in a different way to the way we greet people not of our tribe. We will both be excited and shy[...]shy because without even knowing my name, the man I am talking to can see deep into my heart... (Mazari & Hillman, 2014, p. 3).

As a Scots/Pākehā/Jew, recently immigrated to Western Australia from Aotearoa/New Zealand, I utilise my hybridity to define and re-define myself according to the immediate politics of my day to day context: as a parent of children in the local state high school I play at being an Anglo-Celtic Australian, only blowing my cover over specific cultural issues such as kosher food and Jewish holidays; in synagogue—ours rather anachronistically being a Commonwealth one—I am very much my parents' daughter, a Scots New Zealander; at the local Jewish day school where the parent body is predominantly South African I stand out as a Kiwi; and when I buy coffee in Te Reo from a Māori barrista in Murray Street Mall I am a Pākehā New Zealander. Only occasionally in Perth do I find myself in a situation which allows me to express all my subjectivities at once, as I discovered in 2011 when Kiwi playwright and poet Jennifer Compton (now resident in Melbourne) was a guest at the Perth Poetry Festival. Outside Perth Cultural Centre's Kaos Room, we laughed to discover we had worked in the same theatre in Wellington and I commiserated with her over the recent loss of her mother who had a Jewish connection. After that we felt at ease and lobbed Māori, Scots, Hebrew and Yiddish words into our 'English' conversation. In all these moments I experience the truth of Deleuze

and Guattari's suggestion (1987) that, even in a European country, there is no "universality of language, but an encounter of dialects, patois, argots and special languages..." (Deleuze & Guattari as cited in Brydon & Tiffin, 1993, p. 20). In the twenty-first century, migrants have a hybrid way of doing things.

This hybridity, as I have experienced it, is the explanation for my writing sensibility and interest in 'migrant' writing. I don't identify as an 'Anglo-Celtic' Australian, a categorisation which in itself is problematic as there are so many aspects to anyone's identity, I identify as a new migrant: a Pākehā New Zealand woman with Scottish ancestry living a Jewish life in Western Australia. As such I belong to a category of immigrant without migrant status; like the Ten Pound Poms (post-war migrants who paid ten pounds for a one-way passage), White English-speaking New Zealanders are invisible migrants (Hammerton & Thomson, 2005).

I do not wish to dismiss or delegitimise the additional struggle of People of Colour or those who have struggled to acquire English as a second language. What I am suggesting is that, in early twenty-first century Australia, almost half of Australia's population experience some degree of hybridity.

The theoretical concept of hybridity will be explored further at the beginning of Section Two, in which I investigate the writing of Mena Abdullah and Ray Mathew, and Elizabeth Jolley. In the three chapters of Section One I will introduce my concept of under-storey; outline the historical context within which migrant writing first appeared; and consider the emergence of "migrant writing" in relation to multiculturalism as a field of within Australian literature.

## **Section One: Under-storey, Immigration and Multiculturalism**

### 1.1 Under-storey: Beyond Deleuze and Guattari

From my window in the basement PhD hub I can see the trunks of deciduous trees, their leaves turning in the cool clear weather from green to every shade of lemon, amber and brown. Someone reading this in ten years' time might assume that I am writing this in a Northern Hemisphere autumn, and that the story I am about to tell is a story of the Western centre, a grand narrative, a tree story. They would be wrong. I am sitting in Perth and the trees I am looking at are Plane Trees, an introduced species commonly planted in our Southern Hemisphere city for the shade they provide in the scorch of summer. They have been planted here because WAIT/Curtin University founders at some stage carried in their heads (albeit perhaps with a self-deprecating nod to their own nostalgia) a classical humanist tree narrative. The University, they assumed, should be styled in the manner of the traditional Northern Hemisphere ivy league bastions of Western learning and culture: Oxford and Cambridge, Harvard and Yale. These trees symbolise in Deleuzian terms (Deleuze and Guattari 1987; Brydon & Tiffin, 1993) a type of knowledge and knowledge-making associated with the grand narratives of discovery, colonialism and settlement. In recent times however, the Curtin University garden has been proactively designed and under planted with Australian, more especially Western Australian plant species, many of which are rhizomorphic and which literally and metaphorically relate to the indigenous stories of the Nyoongar Boodjar, the South Western corner of Australia.

Deleuze and Guattari, writing in 1987, rejected categorically the arboreal metaphor for narrative promulgated by classical humanism. They suggested that we should conceive of narrative as a rhizome, rather than a single anchored trunk with branches. "A first type of book is the root book" wrote Deleuze and Guattari. "The book imitates the world, as art imitates nature...The law of the book is the law of reflection, the one that becomes two" (p. 5). Deleuze and Guattari's main criticism of this system of thought is "that it has never reached an understanding of multiplicity" (p. 5). Instead of a tree with roots and branches, Deleuze and Guattari suggested that we envisage narrative as rhizome. "A rhizome as subterranean stem is absolutely different from roots and radicals" (p. 6). "The rhizome itself assumes very diverse forms, from ramified surface extension in all directions to concretion into bulbs and tubers" (p. 7). If we consider narrative as a rhizome, Deleuze and Guattari suggested, we can then discuss multiplicities, "...strata and segmentaries, lines of flight..." (p. 4).



Sensing the dangers inherent in positing a metaphor that would stand in direct contrast to the tree, creating the binary opposition, tree/rhizome, Deleuze and Guattari sought to blur the edges of their categories by reminding the reader that it is “the essence of a rhizome to intersect roots and sometimes merge with them” (p. 13). They suggested that “a new rhizome may form in the heart of a tree, the hollow of a root, the crook of a branch” (p. 15). Deleuze and Guattari are operating in close up here and, as a researcher, positioned in the Southern hemisphere where rainforests abound, I wonder why they have not utilised a wide shot of that forest. I wonder too that Brydon and Tiffin (1993), who pointed to the need to “shift our focus to begin with our own perspectives” (p. 12) did not move beyond Deleuze and Guattari in their work *Decolonising Fictions* wherein they contest the idea that: “postcolonial writers write decolonising fictions, texts that write back against imperial fictions and texts that incorporate alternative ways of seeing and living in the world” (1993, p. 11).

Geographer Amy Lobben, a leading expert on cartography, reminds us that even in the age of Google Maps, when everything we need to know is available at the tap of a screen, our brains still encode the world in the same way that they have always done. We each create our own ‘egocentric’ map. Each of us skews and biases the world in a way that maps our own singular knowledge and experience of it. (Bloomberg CityLab, Nov 24, 2014). Such egocentric maps imply a self-object relationship as opposed to allocentric maps which provide object-object mapping, akin to a bird’s eye view (Imagery Lab, 2018).

It is an accident of birth and life experience that on my egocentric map of the world forests are highlighted. When I first visited the forests of the South West of Western Australia, I felt more at home than I had since leaving Aotearoa/New Zealand. The Karri forests reminded me of the rainforests of South Westland that I had walked and storied and larked about in as a child. They helped me to get my bearings in a new country, and are characterised by their seamless multiplicity, their fecund wealth of green in which plants grow on, over and through each other, sometimes competing for space and resources, sometimes entering into profoundly symbiotic relationships as they work together to their mutual advantage.

Still navigating by the ‘egocentric’ map that I have laid down as an Australasian forest dweller, I relate to the multiplicity of short fiction in Australia through an appreciation of ecology and interconnectedness. To me the wild growth of the rainforest serves as a non-hierarchical, nuanced and Australasian metaphor for the multiplicity of Australian short story. In 2006 Wendy Wheeler noted that “an ecologically informed point of view [...] sees all life, including culture, as naturally co-evolved and interdependent”. (Wheeler 2006, p. 91).

Rather than building a metaphor around the European trees growing outside my window I propose a re-imagining of the multiplicity of story as a living, breathing ecosystem—the kind of forest I grew up with in South Westland, or the rainforests of the southwest of Western Australia. In

my mind I see an ecosystem of story as heterogenous and various in subject choice and narrative mode as are these World Heritage sites in their biological diversity and ecological interconnection. The adoption of an entire forest provides readers and writers with a freer, looser, wilder array of metaphorical opportunities for describing their stories and story making practice(s). We do not need to adopt a binary tree/rhizome model, even a modified one. We can describe our stories in relation to every kind of plant that dwells within the forests that we know. Rather than importing Deleuze and Guattari's metaphor—a metaphor conceived at the Western centre—I propose a metaphor that reflects the physical place and cultural space(s) that Australasians are familiar with from their Southern Hemisphere experience, and which, new arrivals here have the opportunity to encounter.

Such a metaphorical forest of story would incorporate the traditional trees with their roots and branches, as well as the rhizomes of Deleuze and Guattari's oppositional vision. In addition, it would include plants like the New Zealand's Northern Rātā which starts out as an epiphyte before taking on a tree-like morphology in its adult form (Rātā, Department of Conservation, 2021); ferns and bracken which grow from spores (Wagner et al, 2020, 1); drosera or sundews which are tuberous but gain much of their nutrition from their carnivorous habit (A. Jones, 2018, 2); and orchids which, in Western Australia, grow from seed that is thought to germinate only in the presence of mycorrhizal fungus (Collins, 2020, 1). If we consider that each of these types of plant has its counterpart in a forest of story it becomes apparent that at every level—canopy, middle-storey, under-storey—there is not only diversity but interconnection, and that each story is related in some way to another story.

Within such a metaphorical forest, the plants of the under-storey<sup>18</sup> have their social counterpart in Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's 'subaltern' (1988), those groups which leave little impression on the archive: women, migrants, working class and Indigenous peoples. The under-storey's literary counterpart is the minor form, the short story. Given that the focus of this PhD is the migrant short story I am clearly working on under-storey material using a form suited to its articulation. Furthermore, my creative work has developed into a short story cycle, a type of text pertinent to postcolonial contexts. In *The Cambridge Introduction to the American Short Story* (2006) Martin Scofield suggests that the short story cycles provides writers with the opportunity to explore a multiplicity of voices. As such, the form aligns naturally with my concept of under-storey, providing a literary form which has: "a lightness and mobility [...] that suits it to the preoccupations of a fast developing [...] urban culture, characterised by the diversity of its traditions and the mixed nature of its population." (Scofield, 2006, p. 4). In addition, Pacht, (2009) notes that the short story cycle, whether composed (a cycle from the beginning), completed (the collection became a cycle only as it developed) or arranged (a cycle put together only after the stories have been completed

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<sup>18</sup> I maintain the ecological spelling 'under-storey' rather than proposing a new compound word, 'understory' because I do not want to associate my term with a hierarchy.

individually) (6) provides a form which accommodates the general process of multiethnic literature toward polyphony and fragmentation. as it tends to favour the multi-voiced text. (Pacht, 135; Davis, 2002, 17).

Finally, like van Teeseling (2011, 76-89), I will follow feminist scholars such as Nancy Miller who view Barthes' removal of the author as being antithetical to the foundation of feminist discourse and the politics of identity (Miller, 1995) to make a contextualized reading of the texts under study. I will refer to the author's own background and to the wider socio-political context in which their work was received. Thus, before reading Jolley, Abdullah and Le in Sections Two and Three of this exegesis, I will consider the immigration history of Australia (Chapter 1.2) and the relationship between new multicultural policies and the reception of short fiction by migrant writers (Chapter 1.3).

## 1.2 Australian Immigration History

The title story in *Trace*, is set in 1899, just two years prior to Federation: before a temporary hiatus in organised mass immigration from Great Britain due to the Boer War, and after which immigration to Australia was shaped by the White Australia Policy (Jupp, 1988; Peters, 2010; Higgins, 2017). The new nation was conceived of as a racially homogenous and modern state, such that Aboriginal people were not accorded the franchise until 1967. Goldberg describes such entities as follows:

...modern states fashioned themselves not as heterogeneous spaces but homogeneous ones, falsely as fact and repressively as value, and so have acted variously to guarantee, to (rein)force, materially what they have claimed (to be committed to) conceptually and axiologically. (2005, p. 74)

"Falsely as fact," indeed. At Federation, there was already a not insignificant degree of ethnic diversity in Australia's population. Besides the many Aboriginal tribes, now acknowledged as the First People and Traditional Owners of Australia, there were already in Western Australia Afghan cameleers (Peters, 2010, p.47) and indentured Chinese labourers from Singapore (Peters, 2010, p.38), as well as a culturally diverse influx of migrants who came to the goldfields in the mid to late nineteenth century. This population included Greeks, Italians, Chinese and Dalmatians (Peters, 2010, p. 38). Perhaps less well known is that "the bride ships" which brought female immigrants out to Australia from Great Britain sometimes brought with them "foreign" girls. At the turn of the century, just as assisted immigration petered out, a Spanish girl named Rose Vilches travelled to the Swan

River colony with Kitty Page, an Irish girl who managed to keep a journal aboard the SS. Surrey in 1901. Similarly, Kitty Page recorded the presence on her ship of Rosina Dessanges, who was Swiss, and Bolina Winther, who was Danish (Fairweather & Hayes, 2013b, p. 245).

Additionally, the category Anglo-Celtic does little to illuminate the very real differences that existed between immigrants from England, Ireland, Scotland and Wales. The use of the term within the rhetoric of multiculturalism has a reductive impact as Ien Ang observes:

The category Anglo-Celtic is a homogenizing, assimilationist one, implicitly naturalizing the historical domination of the English Protestant elites over Irish Catholics in the national culture. Furthermore, the term implicitly denies the existence of diversity within the 'old Australia' itself (eg. migrant groups from Wales, Scotland, Northern Europe and, especially, Germany) and disallows the possibility for descendants of these pre-War European migrants to claim their ethnic heritages. (Ang, 2001, p. 99)

In the colonial period, it is unlikely that migrants from Great Britain thought of themselves as 'British' until after they arrived in Australia or New Zealand. As New Zealand historian James Belich memorably puts it, Britishness "was a cloak you put on when you went out" (1996, p. 297). Immigrants from the different countries within the British Isles knew little of each other's customs, as is evidenced again by Kitty Page who recorded the organisation of Hogmanay on board ship—a Scottish New Year ceremony she had never before seen (Fairweather and Hayes, 2013b, p. 246)—and when the Cornish miners arrived in Australia their specific skills, strong attachment to Methodism and evident Cornish culture set them apart from the wider Anglo-celtic population to such an extent that they were known as "The Cousin Jacks" (Pryor, 1962; Payton, 1984; Gibbs, 1997).

Patrick O'Farrell, an Australian historian renowned for his work on Irish immigration, points out that even within a category, such as 'Irish,' individuals retained a very strong sense of their religious and class affiliation, as well as specific geographical and kin origins. O'Farrell writes:

Their world, their focus and meaning as social beings, an identity prime, sufficient and fitting, was some particular Irish place. They belonged not to 'Ireland' as a country or an idea, but to a specific village or townland. Once they had left that, all the world was equally foreign and meaningless, tolerable only with kin. (O'Farrell, 1988, pp. 34-35)

The White Australia Policy may be understood then as an instrument of the state which served to cohere diverse kinds of “whiteness” while establishing an oppositional “non-white” category that was to become *persona non grata*. Thus, the policy served to stem the tide of ‘otherness,’ a tide which had, in fact, already gained considerable momentum in Western Australia, prior to the arrival of the post-Second World War populations.

After the war in the Pacific, including the bombing of Darwin and Broome, Australia adopted a “populate or perish” approach to immigration (Jupp, 1988, 24). Between 1947 and 1962 Australia sourced more than one million immigrants. Initially they were refugees, displaced people and post-war immigrants from Western Europe and Great Britain. Later immigration schemes, running through the 1950s and 1960s, attracted the Ten Pound Poms and skilled trade labour from Holland, Italy, and Greece. Throughout the post-war period the White Australia Policy remained in place; Great Britain was the preferred source country for the majority of new immigrants to Australia, and the fair skinned, fair haired Dutch and German immigrants were the next most highly favoured after them (Jupp, 1988, 25; Peters, 2010, 88). It was not until 1967, when Aboriginal people won the right to vote in a national referendum, that the Australian government began to reconsider the White Australia Policy, and it was not until the fall of Saigon in 1975 and the Vietnamese refugee boat arrivals that the White Australia Policy fell into abeyance. As Claire Higgins puts it in *Asylum by Boat. Origins of Australia’s Refugee Policy* (2017), the post-1967 period saw government begin to make changes behind the scenes. By 1972 the White Australia Policy had effectively been dismantled in legislation (Ang, 2001, 103) and in 1978 Fraser’s government accepted the recommendations of the *Report of the Review of Post-arrival Programs and Services for Migrants*, which declared: “Australia is at a critical stage in the development of a cohesive, united, multicultural nation” (Australian Institute of Multicultural Affairs, 1978, p.1) and set out guiding principles that declared that:

all members of our society must have equal opportunity to realise their full potential and must have equal access to programs and services [...] every person should be able to maintain his or her culture without prejudice or disadvantage and should be encouraged to understand and embrace other cultures. (p.1).

The Australian populace was not fully apprised of the government’s policy transition however, nor was everyone accepting of the Australian government’s approach to the highly visible Vietnamese diaspora (Higgins, 2017, 48)<sup>19</sup>. Higgins’s careful analysis of interdepartmental

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<sup>19</sup> In September 1979, Sydney based radio station 2UE broadcast a report on Indochinese refugees in Thailand and Hong Kong. During the extended talkback session with the Minister for Immigration and Ethnic Affairs that

communication between the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, Foreign Affairs and Immigration shows just how important international pressure was in ensuring Australia's acceptance of the Indo-Chinese influx of the 1970s and 1980s. Ien Ang, an Australian academic who was born in Indonesia, writes trenchantly of this era in Australia's past:

It should be noted that Australia's decision to take in these refugees was made in the context of high-level international pressure. The so-called 'boat-people' 'jarred Australians living in their peaceful and stable society to a greater awareness of how near they were to a turbulent South-East Asia' [Lawrence 1983 in Ang]. Their arrival marked the effective beginning of Australia's willy-nilly transformation into a multiracial (and not just multicultural) society. This development was an unintended consequence of world events beyond the nation's own control; it was not something actively willed by the Australian community itself. (Ang, 2001, p. 132)

It is against this historical backdrop that I will consider the emergence and reception of the migrant short story in relation to multiculturalism, and the development of "migrant writing" as a field within Australian Literary Studies.

### 1.3 Multiculturalism, the Emergence of Migrant Writing and Australian Literary Criticism

It has become a truth universally acknowledged, at the turn of the twenty-first century, that a migrant writer writes about his or her own kind. As Nam Le's postgraduate writers put it in his short story, "Love and Honour and Pity and Pride and Compassion and Sacrifice" writers who look and sound different to the Anglo-Celtic population are expected to write solely about their own experience. There are no problems, suggests Nam Le's writer protagonist, "so long as Chinese writers write about Chinese people, or a Peruvian writer about Peruvians, or a Russian writer about Russians" (Le, 2008, p. 8). It has not always been this way, however. In the 1960s a migrant writer was more broadly defined as anyone who had been born overseas, and they were as likely to write about another immigrant culture as they were to write about their own. The following discussion will consider the way in which migrant short fiction was anthologised and described in Australia in the early 1960s, compared to its treatment after the turn towards multiculturalism in the 1970s.

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followed only 4 out of 16 featured listeners supported Australia's refugee program. (Higgins, 2017, p. 48)

In *The Oxford Companion to Australian Literature*, (1995) Wilde and Hooton noted “that all non-Aboriginal Australians come from an immigrant tradition” (p.1), but then focused intently on those writers who came from Irish, Jewish, Yugoslav, Dutch, Italian, Greek, and Indochinese backgrounds. This definition of “migrant” writing, in line with multicultural policy, as “ethnic” or “other” as opposed to Anglo-Celtic was already apparent in the 1980s. L. Houbein (1987), who wrote one of the first bibliographic overviews of migrant writing in Australia, noted that the Australian population at that time was 12.5% foreign-born, “excluding people born in other predominantly English-speaking countries such as the U.K., U.S.A., Canada and New Zealand” (p. 103). By the time the first full-length scholarly work dedicated to migrant writing appeared the Anglo-Celtic/other binary was entrenched.

In the introduction to *Striking Chords: Multicultural Literary Interpretations* (1992), Gunew and O’Longley examine the social processes that led to the marginalisation of migrant and multi-cultural writing, and describe Australia’s national literature as the “ranked writings of the winners” (p. xv)—that is of Anglo-Celtic men. Literary histories such as Gunew and O’Longley’s work provide valuable bibliographic overviews of migrant writing and are, in the Foucauldian sense, “resistance” texts (Hall, 1997, 266; Morrison, 2003, 17)—that is, they represent multi-cultural and migrant writers no longer assenting to their exclusion from institutionalised literary discourse in Australia.

It would be ahistorical to suggest that the work of Houbein, Gunew and O’Longley undertaken in the 1980s and 1990s was the first or only attempt to broaden, and make more inclusive, the definition of the Australian short story, as the following analysis of two short story anthologies, and their reception, will show.

In an article published in *Australian Literary Studies* in 2000, Steve Holden, drawing on the work of John Guillory, suggested that anthologies play a key role in canon formation:

In one sense they *describe* a group of texts as though selecting from a larger body of possibilities. In another they *constitute* that group of texts and also what gets to be called that imaginary larger body (from which the anthology contents appear to be drawn). In yet another they *consecrate* that group of texts as the best examples drawn from a larger body of possibilities according to terms that the anthologist dictates. [Holden’s italics] (Holden, 2000, p. 279).

For the purpose of this discussion it will be assumed that anthologies describe, constitute and consecrate a selection of Australian short stories, and that this grouping of stories is then perceived

to be the most representative of the Australian short story genre, at least provisionally, and until the next anthology of short fiction appears.

As we shall see, what might have been a singular attempt by Cecil Hadgraft and Richard Wilson to represent a century of Australian stories, by publishing a volume of that name in 1963, was immediately challenged by the arrival of a second anthology in the same year. *Two Ways Meet: Stories of Migrants in Australia* edited by American academic, Louise Rorabacher, specifically featured the work of migrant writers and focussed on migrant concerns. I will argue that the appearance of this second anthology represents an attempt to enlarge the definition of Australian short fiction, *prior* to the emergence of multiculturalism as an official government policy in Australia.

Cecil Hadgraft and Richard Wilson's *A Century of Australian Stories* and Rorabacher's anthology will be examined here in order to develop a sense of the Australian short story canon at the one hundred-year mark, and to consider the way in which the Australian short story was defined prior to *Striking Chords* (1992).

In their introduction to *A Century of Australian Stories* (1963), Hadgraft and Wilson made it clear that they considered *The Bulletin* to have "made the Australian story" (p. xii). Hadgraft and Wilson then provide two descriptions of the Australian short story based on their perception of the 1,400 examples published in *The Bulletin* 1890 – 1900:

It [*The Bulletin* short story] was nearly always short, though some writers could be allowed latitude; it dealt with reality known at first hand, and this was often outback; it was laconic; it depended much on understatement; sentiment was kept on a tight rein; and in dialogue and general atmosphere it was essentially Australian. (1963, p.xi)

Additionally, Hadgraft and Wilson suggest that *The Bulletin* stories were:

terse, forceful, real and realistic, written in the actual language of man instead of the dream language of romantics and they were varied and gave a fairly comprehensive picture of Australian life of the period. (1963, p.xiii)

Both these descriptions suggest that Australian short stories should be brief, realistic and concerned with life in Australia. They also suggest that there was a tone and language emerging that could be associated with the Australian short story: a straightforward use of language, and a lack of sentimentality. Significantly, neither description suggests that homogeneity should be the rule. Indeed, the second description points to the varied nature of Australian short stories, and the



anthology itself bears this out. Of the thirty-five writers, nine—if we include Henry Lawson (Larsen) who was born to a Norwegian immigrant gold prospector<sup>20</sup>—were born overseas or have at least one parent born overseas, and eight out of thirty-five stories contain a migrant character.

In some cases, the migrant origins of the character portrayed are central to the story's plot, as in John Lang's "The Ghost Upon the Rail" (pp. 1-19). The short mystery story which opens *A Century of Australian Short Stories* is predicated upon the purported return of a migrant to his English homeland. Elsewhere, as in Ernest Favenc's "The Parson's Blackboy" (pp. 34-49) a parson, newly arrived from England, becomes the butt of a communal (though racist and misogynist) joke, so that the story serves to lampoon the naiveté of the new chum and highlight the absurdity of attempting to replace "the customs of the country" (p. 37) with English standards of comportment.

Frank Dalby Davison's "Sojourners" (pp. 121-133) and Tasma<sup>21</sup>'s, "How a Claim was Nearly Jumped in Gum-Tree Gully" (pp. 20-33) similarly focus on the impact of a new arrival. In both stories a settler/colonist, established on the land, albeit tentatively, is joined by his female partner who is characterised by her gender, her cultural and/or her ethnic difference. In both stories the female character is represented as a disruptor of pre-existing social relations, based on mateship and acts of mutually beneficial reciprocity.

In "How a Claim was Nearly Jumped in Gum Tree Gully" (20), Tasma, born in London to Dutch parents, writes of the preparations made for the arrival of a settler's bride and the way in which mateship relationships are sundered by that event. The newly arrived young woman (Tilly) is described as:

A small-faced, sallow woman, inexpressibly neat all over, with large eyes and white teeth, and a pose foreign to Gum-tree Gully belles, with dark plaits just showing on their smooth surface a chance grey hair...(1963, p.29)

The female arrival is "inexpressible", and "foreign". She is unlike "Gum-tree Gully belles" and her arrival ultimately disrupts the easy camaraderie of the men: Firstly, because she is a woman, and secondly because she is culturally the same as her husband. From the moment Tilly emerges from the coach, Dave asserts her primacy, introducing his male companion as "my mate" (p. 30) without reference to his name. Significantly neither Dave nor the writer ascribe "Dave's mate" a name anywhere in the story and, "I put you first, you see, Tilly, and he comes second" continues Dave,

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<sup>20</sup> Born in 1867 to Niels Hertzberg Larsen (aka Peter Larsen) Henry Lawson is sometimes referred to as Australia's greatest short story writer. [www.poetrylibrary.edu.au/poets/lawson/henry](http://www.poetrylibrary.edu.au/poets/lawson/henry).

<sup>21</sup> Tasma was a non de plume for Jessie Couvreur née Huybers who was born in London to Dutch parents (Notes to Hadgraft & Wilson, 1963, p.333).

stressing his point (p. 30). Thus, “the mate” is rendered a lone figure cut adrift from the bond of Australian mateship. Betrayed by the inner workings of a heart that yearns to have Tilly for himself, “Dave’s mate” is forced to leave the bush claim and move on.

“Sojourners” (pp 121-133) has a different trajectory in that the new arrival comes to join Captain Vachell who is himself described as a new chum in the following terms:

rising forty; a tall slender Englishman with long narrow face and dark hair sprinkled with grey. He was of a type the Old Country turns off in fairly large numbers; well-spoken, well-mannered, courageous, generous and gentle, but not very bright [...] He was the sort of fellow whose most absorbing joy was doing things with his hands. [...] He came of middling well-to-do people [...] in the post-war scramble he had failed to secure a position adequate for his support in the class to which he belonged; the dull boy of the family, apparently, the unfortunate inheritor of nothing but good breeding [...]. The generosity of an aunt [...] had furnished the means for his migration.’ (p. 121)

The narrator’s attitude to his Captain Vachell is clearly that of the born Australian toward the likely incompetent newcomer. The first part of the story hinges on the question: “How long will he last?” (p. 121). As it happens, Captain Vachell performs more than adequately and has his section in good order forthwith. It is only after his wife arrives that things begin to go wrong. Unable to jettison her English socio-cultural aspirations she alienates first Captain Vachell’s matey neighbour with whom he previously joined forces “when four hands were needed, turn and turn about” (p. 123). Social visits to three other local families—the Coopers, the Dunlops and the Kennedys—are similarly unsuccessful in helping Mrs Vachell to settle. In summary, the first-person narrator, Captain Vachell’s mate, suggests they are all “worthy folk here but hardly Mrs Vachell’s kind” (p. 125). By the end of the story there is nothing for Captain Vachell to do but sell up and return, with his wife, to England.

Judith Wright’s story, “The Weeping Fig” (pp. 226-231), is concerned with a similar theme, as a middle-aged man returns to the land his great-grandfather settled and where his great-grandmother, Ellen, and two of their children were buried. Again, the focus of the story is the vast difference between England and Australia, geographically, culturally and socially. Here the protagonist John Condon observes the environment in the following harsh terms: “But the heat in the little room drove him back to the door. It was inhuman, that heat, the climate of another world” (p. 229). Additionally this story suggests that Australian history and fiction have valorised the pioneers. Within the narrative an attempt is made to counteract the colonial myth. Shortly after the passage quoted above John Condon goes on to observe:

Pioneers, oh pioneers! A lot of rot was talked about them. As though they had been better than human creatures, as though they had been equipped with an extra allowance of endurance, virtue, nobility, as though they had been— clichés. (p. 229)

With the exception of “The Ghost Upon the Rail” and “The Parson’s Blackboy”, the stories discussed so far consider the migrant’s lot in relation to the nation-building projects of colonisation and settlement. The narrator in “Sojourners” determines to put up with Mrs Vachell’s complaints without retaliating, “for the sake of an addition to our population” (p. 124), and John Condon in “The Weeping Fig” is clear sighted about the role that the development of a post-contact history and fiction play in promulgating a pioneer myth to support the colonisation and settlement project. It is only with Judah Waten’s story, “Well What do You Say to My Boy?” (pp. 247-260) positioned twenty-ninth in the collection of thirty-five, that a migrant voice depicts the experience of a more urbanised migrant community, and their overwhelming concern for inter-generational educational advancement in a new land.

In “Well, What do You Say to My Boy?” (pp. 247-260) the migrant writer himself begins speaking from within a migrant community about that community’s concerns. The story’s protagonist, Mrs Green, is portrayed as a member of the Jewish diaspora, and the story works itself out in relation to Jewish socio-cultural aspirations, according to which every child must work hard at school and rise into the professions. “For why did they come to Australia if not to educate their children, to avail themselves of schooling which was to be had there and not in their old homes?” (p. 247) Significantly too this story is set in town rather than out in the bush, or on the land.

While the contributing writers were not a homogeneous group, and a number of stories evidence an interest in the experience of migrants, *A Century of Australian Stories* (1963) tends to depict migrants of British extraction participating in the twin nation building projects of colonisation and settlement. With the exception of “How a Claim was Nearly Jumped in Gum Tree Gully”, which depicts a “foreign” woman arriving to live in the bush, it is not until the end of the collection that urban immigrant voices, the ones that multi-culturalism will later name and categorise as NESB (non-English Speaking Background) and “migrant”, begin to emerge. Less concerned with representing the Australian short story over time, and perhaps bringing an outsider’s eye to bear, Louise Rorabacher’s anthology *Two Ways Meet: Stories of Migrants to Australia* (1963) sought to focus specifically on representing a greater range of immigrant experiences. As Rorabacher put it, she was looking for “melting pot” stories (p. 10).

*Two Ways Meet* featured twenty-two stories selected in the main part from editions of the annual, and later biennial publication, *Coast to Coast*. In her introduction to the anthology Rorabacher wrote:

In making this collection I have been impressed by the extensiveness of the literature available to choose from, especially in the decade and a half since the heavy post-war migrations began. This increasing interest in the whole migrant problem—proof of fiction’s sensitivity to social change—is clearly reflected in the serial publication *Coast to Coast*. The first three volumes of this short story anthology, which began to appear annually in 1941, contain no stories with migrant themes. But even before the war ends, the POWs begin to appear in its pages; and after, in increasing numbers, the DPs and other immigrants, late and early. In the three biennial volumes of the mid-fifties, almost a quarter of the selections deal with immigrants, nearly half of these, curiously, with situations antedating the war. The post-war influx of New Australians, it appears, led to an increased interest in the entire migrant phenomenon. (Rorabacher, 1963, p. 14)

Of the nineteen contributing writers represented in *Two Ways Meet*, nine of the writers were born overseas, or had at least one parent born overseas. In every case the stories feature immigrant characters in a key role. In contrast to the 1980s and beyond however, the majority of stories are told by a writer observing a culture other than his or her own. “The Knife” by Jewish writer Judah Waten pertains to the experience of a Calabrian immigrant (pp. 53-61), and the two stories by German-Australian writer, E.O. Schlunke—“The Enthusiastic Prisoner” (pp. 74-80) and “Assimilation” (pp. 151-163)—concern an Italian prisoner of war and a Syrian family respectively.

Stories by Australian-born writers sometimes reflect the professional involvement of the writer in refugee and migrant work, or English as a second language (ESL) teaching and depict individual Australians attempting to understand and respond to the effects of trauma that the displaced persons and refugees brought with them, often quite ineffectually. This is particularly evident in Neilma Sidney’s “Saturday Afternoon” (pp. 129-137) in which a woman walks with her young nephew, and a dog, alongside the river one Saturday, after rain. They come across a dejected looking figure several times and assume that he is a new Australian, perhaps “a Frenchman, or then again a Hungarian or Pole, or from any one of a number of countries” (p. 130). Although the woman encounters the man several times, she does not stop to interact with him, and the reader is able to gather no more specific information than that observed by her. At the end of the story the narrator

discovers that the man jumped into the torrent and drowned soon after she passed him by. Conversely, in “And What Part of Europe do You Come From?” (pp. 164-171), Lesley Rowlands contrasts the singularity and loneliness of an Australian-born English teacher with the implied collectivity and community of a flat full of holocaust survivors—albeit that they are struggling to process their recent experiences of trauma and loss.

Other stories by writers born overseas focus on strategies for assimilation. In particular, Mena Abdullah’s “Grandfather Tiger” (pp. 62-68), which will be discussed further in Section Two of this exegesis; F.B. Vickers’s “Make Like You” (pp. 117-124;) and the cautionary tale by Nathan Spielvogel, “Mr Bronstein Learns His Lesson” (pp. 69-73), feature protagonists who attempt to change their name, or their behaviour and mannerisms in order to more easily blend into the Australian social context. These characters meet with varying results.

Significantly for this study, the focus of “Who Steals Trash” by Australian writer Vivian Cunnington (pp. 138-142) is as much on the relationship between immigrants of different backgrounds as it is on the relationship between established, White Australians and the newcomers. As a result, there is no clear binary divide between a perceived Anglo-Celtic core and the migrant periphery in this story, but rather a sense of a new, multi-ethnic society in the making. In Cunnington’s “Who Steals Trash”, migrants live alongside but are not immersed in conversation with Anglo-Australia, and, because of their numbers they can create a social world among themselves. This multi-ethnic urban milieu later becomes fertile territory for twenty-first century writers such as Christos Tsiolkas whose short stories: “Merciless Gods” (2014, pp. 1-46) and “Sticks, Stones” (2014, pp. 208-225) inhabit a multi-ethnic urban space.

*Two Ways Meet* became so popular it was reprinted by the Australian publisher F.W Cheshire in 1967 and again in 1969 (see Appendix 2). Clearly Rorabacher’s work had found an audience. Significantly, shortly after *Two Ways Meet* was published in 1963, several single author short story collections by migrant writers appeared: Eric Otto Schlunke’s *Stories of the Riverina* and Mena Abdullah and Ray Mathew’s *The Time of the Peacock* were published in 1965, and in that year Judah Waten’s *Alien Son*—originally published in 1952—was re-issued. Bergner’s *Where the Truth Lies* was published in 1966 and, by the end of the decade, *The Time of the Peacock* was available in Australia in both hardback and paperback editions. Clearly, there was considerable interest in migrant short fiction through the 1960s and 1970s and an Australian market for such work.

In conclusion, the stories anthologised in *A Century of Australian Short Story* and *Two Ways Meet* adopt a wide range of speaking positions and are testament to the fact that writers of diverse backgrounds were already involved in exploring the complexity of the migrant experience prior to the late 1970s and 1980s—the period characterised by multiculturalism, and during which writers began to be placed in the binary categories Anglo-Celtic/Migrant. Put simply, migrant fiction was an

established part of the literary landscape in Australia prior to Gunew and O'Longley's *Striking Chords: Multicultural Literary Interpretations*. What we see in Gunew and O'Longley's endeavour is university-based professionals in the 1980s and 90s becoming involved in clearing space to read and teach migrant writing within the academy. This endeavour came on the back of wider social movements which had their origin in the 1960s and 1970s. Gunew and O'Longley's work in the 1980s may be viewed as part of the attempt to establish a new "anti-canon" (van Teeseling, 2011, 49-56) within the University which would more accurately reflect Australia's new interest in feminism, Aboriginal land rights and multiculturalism—movements that were engendered by writers, readers and activists in the first place. Rather than remaining on the periphery, waiting to be invited into the University, migrant writers began creating their own under-storey, and taking Australia to a new threshold in the late 1950s, which is when Mena Abdullah's stories first appeared in *The Bulletin* (Shapcott, 1992, p. v). By the time the American scholar Louise Rorabacher visited Australia there was sufficient material to create a "melting-pot" anthology (Rorabacher, 1963, 10). By the time *Striking Chords* appeared migrant writing was already established as a thriving feature of the Australian under-storey.

In Section Two of this exegesis I will consider the notion of hybridity and examine the work of two writers with a hybrid sensibility: Mena Abdullah who was born in Australia to Punjabi parents of Hindu and Muslim origin; and Elizabeth Jolley who was born to an Austrian mother and British father, arriving in Australia as an adult.

## Section Two:

### Mobilising Hybridity: An investigation of the work of Mena Abdullah and Elizabeth Jolley

This chapter of the exegesis will discuss the work of Mena Abdullah and Elizabeth Jolley, writers whose first short stories were written and published at a time when the grand narrative of Australian history was a colonisation and settlement story. Assimilation was the order of the day, and Australian literature was perceived to be a “regional variety of English literature” (Carter as cited in Milech, 2007, p, 2). Developing a coherent nationalist canon was the core project for Australian literary studies in the 1950s.

What makes Abdullah and Mathew’s *The Time of the Peacock* and Elizabeth Jolley’s *Five Acre Virgin* so pertinent to this study is the way in which both these texts are imbued with a hybrid sensibility, and represent how first generation migrants and their second generation offspring mobilise their hybridity in order to negotiate the tension between assimilation and resistance.

Mena Abdullah was born in 1930 in Bundarra, New South Wales, to sheep-farming immigrant parents from the Punjab. Writing poetry initially and then short stories, Abdullah collaborated with schoolteacher and poet, Ray Mathew<sup>22</sup>, to produce the short story collection *Time of the Peacock* in 1965. In a sense Abdullah’s ethnicity has resulted in her never being fully accepted into the Australian canon; her works are taught in Australia as “Asian writing” (Gooneratne, 1992, pp. 124-32). Ironically, Elizabeth Jolley, who arrived in Australia from Great Britain in 1959 at the age of 36, has become so much accepted into the Anglo-Celtic Australian canon that many readers lose sight of the fact that her formative years were spent in wartime England, where she was parented by a German-speaking mother from Austria and an English father.

Mena Abdullah and Elizabeth Jolley’s subjectivities are further complicated by the fact that they were both parented by converts: Abdullah writes of her mother’s conversion to Islam and her Muslim marriage as something that was never fully resolved with her mother’s Hindu family; and Jolley’s father, a Methodist, joined the non-denominational Quakers at a time when his pacifist beliefs, manifest in his becoming a conscientious objector, were little tolerated by the mainstream church. Jolley writes of experiencing “not being a Birth Right Quaker at a Quaker boarding school” (1992, p. 2) as an additional layer of unbelonging, explaining in her personal writings that she had a compound sense of being “on the edge, something of an exile” (1992, p.2). Because of her parents’ ethnic and religious backgrounds, the household’s involvement with displaced persons during her childhood, and her experience of difference both at the Quaker boarding school and as a trainee nurse,

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<sup>22</sup> Ray Mathew met Mena Abdullah when they were both working at the CSIRO (1952-1954). Mathew, already an exponent of verse-drama encouraged Abdullah’s interest in poetry and short story and she began publishing her poems in 1954. (Shapcott, 1990, pp. vi-vii). According to Shapcott: “His [Mathew’s] influence on her style and approach to subject matter is most clearly felt in the development of lyrical poise in her work” (Shapcott, vii).

Jolley arrived in Australia with a ready formed propensity to write about the complexities of migration and displacement. Mena Abdullah's first lessons in cultural negotiation similarly pre-date her encountering White Australia, being learned within the confines of her family where Hindu, Muslim and Punjabi cultural practices co-existed. Like Jolley, she indexes this hybrid experience in her short stories.

By considering Elizabeth Jolley and Mena Abdullah as writers with a hybrid sensibility rather than migrant writers, it is possible to read their work with less reference to the Anglo-Celtic/Migrant binary and to appreciate the subtle shifts and adjustments represented in the stories, as first and second generation migrant characters seek to negotiate their identity as fluid and multiple, rather than fixed and single. Before proceeding to a detailed study of the Abdullah and Jolley texts, I must first clarify what I mean by the term "hybridity".

## 2.1 Hybridity

When Homi Bhabha first published his ideas concerning "in-between" spaces (Bhabha, 1994, 1) and "interstices" (1994, 2), suggesting that hybridity would become a hallmark of our socio-cultural existence in an increasingly globalised world, he could not have known how widely his ideas would be adopted, and variously critiqued. Bhabha's idea that entrenched binary oppositions, based on differentiated postcolonial power positions such as African-American/Anglo-American, could be circumvented by the notion of a "Third space of enunciation" (1994, 37)—within which "the disruptive temporality of enunciation displaces the narrative of the Western nation" (37), and invention, improvisation and intervention hold sway—excited cultural scholars and critics. Hybridity became a "fashionable term in contemporary cultural theory and its use is often associated with the celebration of transgressive triumph, innovative creativity and audacious cultural fusion" (Ang, 2001, 70). The postmodernism of transnational, cosmopolitan scholars like Homi Bhabha rose in ascendancy. Other scholars were less sanguine.

In 1995 Anne McClintock termed Hybridity a scandal and Robert Young drew attention to its racial origins. Ten years later David Theo Goldberg wrote an article entitled "Heterogeneity and Hybridity: Colonial Legacy, Postcolonial Heresy" in which he enunciated the origin of hybridity in the nineteenth century as follows:

hybridity represented dominant concerns that white or European-based purity, power and privilege would be polluted, and in being polluted diluted. If whites were supposedly superior intellectually and culturally to those not white, then on



amalgamationist assumptions the mixing of those non white with white generative capacity *ex hypothesis* would imperil the power of the latter, would result in their degeneration. (Goldberg, 2005, p. 79)

Meanwhile Stuart Hall (2000) and Suki Ali (2007) challenged post-colonial intellectuals like Bhabha to pay greater attention to the complexities of the embodied experience of migrants, especially women, and Vijay Mishra (1999) suggested that while notions of hybridity and the third space might be of use to the cosmopolitan intellectual and art critic they overlooked the very real feelings of melancholia experienced by those living a diasporic existence.

There is not space to reprise all the critiques of Homi Bhabha's concept of hybridity here. While I acknowledge that the provenance of the word "hybrid" is problematic, the notion of a fluid, multiply negotiated identity, rather than an identity that is fixed and determined by origin or initial subjectivity, provides a useful theoretical foundation for much of the work I propose to do in this chapter. Particularly pertinent to the current study is Ang's concept of "tactical hybridity". (Ang, 2001, p. 73)

In her 2001 work, *On Not Speaking Chinese*, Ien Ang concludes that her Chineseness is a fluid category, a porous, negotiated thing made complex by her having lived in three countries—Indonesia, the Netherlands and Australia. In summary she writes: "if I am inescapably Chinese by *descent*, I am only sometimes Chinese by *consent*. When and how much is a matter of politics" (Ang, 2001, p. 36). This concept of a negotiated identity was similarly posited by Stuart Hall in 1987. Writing about ethnicity in "Minimal Selves", Hall concluded—"Every statement comes from somewhere, from somebody in particular. It insists on specificity, on conjuncture. But it is not necessarily armour-plated against other identities. It is not tied." (Hall, 1997, p. 138) Ang contends that hybridity is not the preserve of the diasporic intellectual but rather a tactic deployed by ordinary people on an everyday basis. Hybridity, writes Ang:

is not a superior form of transformative resistance, nor the only mode of politics available, but, rather more humbly, a limited but crucial, life sustaining tactic of everyday survival and practice in a world overwhelmingly dominated by large-scale historical forces whose effects are beyond the control of those affected by them. (Ang, 2001, p. 73)

It is this notion of hybridity as a tactic, a way of moving across, through and between a range of cultural contexts by speaking, writing or performing different aspects of ourselves that informs the following discussion of the short fiction of Mena Abdullah and Ray Mathew, and Elizabeth Jolley.

In the following discussion I will contend that Abdullah, a writer with a hybrid sensibility, produced a series of short fiction works that may be read as representing her lived experience of Ang's tactical hybridity. Jolley, ever a strategist and tactician, deliberately blended British, European and Australian elements in order to gain a foothold in the Australian publishing market; the first short stories Jolley published in Australia were hybrid texts that document the melancholy of single male immigrants. Finally, I suggest that both writers make such significant use of autobiographical material in their work and that their writing may be read in relation to the notions of hybridity pertinent to autofiction.

*The Time of the Peacock* is the earliest known short story collection by an Australian writer of Asian extraction and, from 1973, it was regularly included on the Macquarie University reading list for Modern Asian Writing in English (Gooneratne 124-125). In an academic context, critics have embraced *The Time of the Peacock* as an example of diasporic literature and Indian-Australian wisdom writing, critiquing one or two stories at a time, however few significant attempts have been made to read the stories outside of the framework provided by an Anglo-Celtic/other binary. This analysis will discuss the stories' depiction of a world in which key characters perform their hybridity, and negotiate cross-cultural interactions on an everyday basis, and consider the ways that the stories speak to one another across the collection, amplifying the tensions between assimilation and cultural resistance.

Born at Bundarra in New South Wales in 1930, Mena Abdullah grew up in a close Punjabi family in the New England district. Her Father, a Muslim from the Punjab, arrived in Australia when he was fifteen years old and made a living as an itinerant hawker before winning a land lottery and taking up a pastoral run on the banks of the Gwydir River (New England) where he became a successful grazier. Mena's mother, a Brahmin, met her husband as an adult, and converted to Islam in order to marry him. She subsequently joined his pastoral enterprise at Bundarra. Following the birth of Mena's brother, the family sold up and moved to Sydney where the children were educated. *The Time of the Peacock* (1965), written with writer and schoolteacher Ray Matthew, collects together stories which had previously appeared in *The Bulletin*, *Quadrant* and *Hemisphere*.

In an assertive 1992 essay entitled "Mena Abdullah, Australian Writer", Yasmine Gooneratne sought to position Abdullah at the centre of the Australian Literary project rather than on the periphery. She noted that, "Abdullah is one of the few authors of Asian background who have achieved substantial publication in Australia" (Gooneratne, 1992, p. 116), and celebrated Abdullah's skilful integration of autobiographical material into short forms that not only record the details of Australian life in the 1930s, but which are "remarkable for the fineness of (the) author's observation and the delicacy with which she notes the significance of what her child characters see and hear" (Gooneratne, 1992, p. 118). Additionally, Gooneratne noted that Abdullah references "the Indian tradition of family and community story telling" (1992, p. 116) and the mythic past in both narrative and formal ways. She also suggested that Abdullah's work may be read as a form of Indian-Australian wisdom writing; Abdullah's

“intention as a writer,” concluded Gooneratne, “is to inform new migrants of ways in which the unavoidable trauma of expatriation can be minimised and borne, especially by children.” (1992, p. 119).

With the exception of Gooneratne herself, critics 1992-2014 have, for the most part, confined their comments to two stories: “Because of the Rusilla” and “Grandfather Tiger”. These works concern themselves primarily with the challenges of assimilation into Anglo-Celtic Australia at a time when the White Australia Policy was still in force. Significantly, it is these two stories which have most frequently been anthologised (Aust-Lit. 18 November, 2016), so that it seems, as ABC Radio arts producer Jane Ulman put it, “the source of a culture is not as interesting or as legitimate as the Australianisation of that culture” (Ulman as cited in Bobis, 2010, p. 3). Bobis, who documented Jane Ulman’s comments, suggests that new readings of migrant and multi-cultural stories are made possible when we stop privileging the Australian story, that is, the story of how “they” became “Australian”, and consider the stories instead on their own terms.

For the purpose of this reading, I will ask—How does Mena Abdullah represent the reality of a Punjabi Indian family living in Australia in the 1930s? This question assumes that the stories in *The Time of the Peacock* stem from autobiographical experience. I will not problematise that assumption here, as Mena Abdullah has openly acknowledged and discussed the autobiographical basis of her work (Gooneratne, 1992, 116) and all except the last two stories in this collection are narrated from a first-person point-of-view. What I will be concerned with, initially, is the way that the young protagonists Nimmi and Joti are explicitly taught to perform their hybridity and multiple subjectiviti(e)s in order to move fluidly in and out of different social environments.

### 2.1.1 Learning Hybridity

In the opening and title story, “The Time of the Peacock”, (Abdullah, 1965, pp. 1-10) Nimmi, a middle child, is impatiently awaiting the birth of her third sibling. Through her eyes we learn what it is to negotiate Australia as a Punjabi, and additionally, as the daughter of a Muslim Father and a Hindu (Brahmin) mother. In this first story Nimmi becomes aware, perhaps for the first time, of the extent to which judicious and constant cultural negotiation on the part of her parents enables her to enjoy a world that feels integrated, secure and harmonious. In “Time of the Peacock”, and the collection’s first seven stories, Nimmi comes to feel that she has “grown up” (Abdullah, 1965, p. 10). Like *Alien Son* (Waten, 1952) and *Stories from Suburban Road* (Hungerford, 1983), the journey from childhood to early adulthood shapes this collection. Nimmi’s journey to adulthood is complex

however; in order for Nimmi to mature she must learn to negotiate a range of different cultural contexts.

“The Time of the Peacock” opens with Nimmi perched in her mother’s garden. She is gazing out beyond the farm, to the horizon, attempting to count the hill tops in Hindi. Making a child’s mistake with the counting (she has left out counting cha/four) Nimmi resorts to Hindu cosmology, inherited from her mother (Ama), to make sense of what feels to her a profound change in the scheme of things. Nimmi convinces herself that Krishna has moved the hills in the night, while simultaneously acknowledging that the hills themselves are Australian, as she is. Like the child who is soon to be birthed, Nimmi is a second-generation immigrant and this counting game, used to frame the first story of the collection, neatly encapsulates the way in which Nimmi must learn, and learn to carry her Indian cultural knowledge in an Australian world.

Within the frame of Nimmi’s hill counting, the first-person narrator tells a story based on her recollection of early adolescence:

One spring I remember was the time of the peacock when I learnt the word *secret* [Abdullah’s italics] and began to grow up. After that spring everything somehow was different, was older. I was not little anymore, and the baby came. (Abdullah, 1965, p. 1)

This is a story of growing up, of beginning to equip oneself for life beyond the walls of Ama’s nurturing garden, where she stands secure within a Punjabi world. Here, physically held within the walls of the garden itself, and within the Mother-daughter bond, Nimmi learns to associate Kashmiri roses, jasmine, white violets and the pomegranate tree with the Punjabi world her mother came from. Beyond this female, family space is a male space, that of her Father’s wool sheds and the yard. This space is associated with male workers and visitors. Beyond the sheds and the yard there are the hills, “with their changing faces and their Australianness” (Abdullah, 1965, p. 12). Tucker (2003) and Dalal (2011) remark on Abdullah’s depiction of these concentric spheres, each associated with a different aspect of Nimmi’s life. Tucker suggests that, nested within the hills, the Australian bush becomes a third space, a place where the children can experiment with hybridity and develop an Indian-Australian way of being (2003, 180). While such observations are insightful, they suggest that Nimmi and her siblings must first separate from their family of origin and move out of the Indian family space to develop their hybridity. By contrast I will suggest that Nimmi’s hybridity is consciously and explicitly fostered by her parents *within the home*, within the family unit, and well before any direct interaction with Anglo-Celtic Australia. Hybridity is perceived by Nimmi’s Father as inherent to his way of life, and it must be engendered in his children, or they will be unable to move competently

between the different cultural modes that co-exist within their family. If they learn to function successfully within a Muslim-Hindu-Punjabi family, they will be able to one day negotiate the wider Australian world.

The care with which Nimmi's father trains his children to be culturally fluid can be seen later in the story when, feeling out of sorts and teary, Nimmi comes upon her father weaving baskets, just beyond the trellised walls of the kitchen garden (5). In this context, held within the father-daughter bond, and observing her father engaged in traditional basket-making, Nimmi is encouraged to think critically about Ama's actions. Her father, who is Muslim, male, and a long time Australian resident, prompts her to take on a new grown-up role—one that is characterised by a sensitive negotiation of her Mother's Brahmin and Punjabi beliefs, within a Muslim household, located in an Australian bush setting. The scene takes place just after Nimmi has observed her mother putting out bowls of milk in the garden as if to feed the friendly cobra of Indian village life (Gooneratne, 1992, 118). Father is concerned about the safety of his wife's actions and speaks soberly to his daughter:

“Listen,” he said. “You are big now, Nimmi. I will tell you a secret.”

“What is a secret?”

He sighed. “It is what is ours,” he said. “Something we know but do not tell or share with one person only in the world.”

“With me!” I begged. “With me!”

“Yes,” he said, “with you. But no crying or being nothing. This is to make you a grown-up person (...) We are Muslims,” he said. “But your mother has a mark on her forehead that shows that once she was not. She was a Brahmin and she believed all the stories of Krishna and Shiva.”

“I know that,” I said, “and the hills—”

“Monkey, quiet,” he commanded. “But now Ama is Muslim too. Only she remembers her old ways. And she puts out the milk in spring.”

“For the snakes,” I said. “So they will love us, and leave us from harm.”

“But there are no snakes in the garden,” said Father. “And they must not come, because there is no honour in snakes. They would strike you or Rashida or little Lal or even Ama. So—and this is the secret that no one must know but you and me—I go to the garden in the night and empty the dishes of milk. And this way I have no worry and you have no harm and Ama's faith is not hurt. But you must never tell.” (Abdullah 1965, p. 6)

In this dialogue Nimmi's father explicitly teaches his daughter to display a cultural sensitivity that fully acknowledges the need for each one of us to respect, and work with, the beliefs and cultural practices of those with whom we live. When Ien Ang uses the phrase "tactical hybridity" this is the kind of "tactic" and daily cultural negotiation that she means. To grow up Nimmi must learn to interpret multiple cultural settings and to negotiate them effectively, performing herself in accordance with the needs of each one.

### 2.1.2 Hybridity and Linguistic Choice

In a later story "Mirbani" (Abdullah, 1965, pp. 29-41) Nimmi makes use of her diverse linguistic knowledge, as well as her various cultural understandings, to negotiate for herself. Here, Nimmi is chatting to Nani, her maternal grandmother, a Brahmin Hindu:

"Punjabi voices," the old lady says. "Punjabi faces. There is nothing of my people in my children here."

I wanted to be a Punjabi like Father—I always had—but I wanted to please Grandmother and I would have liked to be like her and like Ama, too. Suddenly I had a thought.

"Mirbani," I said. "Mirbani" is a Hindi word. There is no word in Punjabi like it, and there is none in English unless it is grace, the state of grace, or graciousness. It is a word that means all those things, and something more.

"What, child? What?"

"That is you Nani," I said. "Mirbani."

Grandmother began to laugh. "I was wrong," she said. "There is the soul of the Brahmin in thee." (Abdullah, 1965, pp. 37- 38)

In this exchange, Nimmi makes a cultural assessment of the situation, chooses an appropriate subject position, and adopts an affective linguistic register in relation to Nani, *on her own*. Without the intermediary of her Father or Mother, Nimmi chooses here to perform her most Brahmin self. By drawing on her knowledge of Nani's first language (Hindi), and deploying her Brahmin cultural knowledge, Nimmi is able to compliment, and draw close to, her Nani. The effect of Nimmi's choice is to create the emotional and cultural closeness both women are seeking at that moment and conveys

to her maternal grandmother that her prized cultural and linguistic heritage has not been entirely forgotten by her Australian grandchildren.

Linguistic choice is used elsewhere in the stories that make up *The Time of the Peacock* to signify a change in the state of a relationship, or to denote that a character has anchored down especially firmly in one subject position or wishes his audience to participate with him/her in extended linguistic game playing. The attention that Abdullah has Nimmi pay to linguistic choice foregrounds Nimmi's hybrid learning journey. She is learning, through observation and role modelling, how to perform and to read multiple subjectivities as they play out in various day to day settings, and to determine which of her own multiple subjectivities to deploy.

This is exemplified, as Gooneratne has noted, in "The Outlaws", (Abdullah, 1965, pp.42-51) wherein Seyed switches unconsciously from English to Punjabi in order to tell the story of Malik Khan, the Pathan outlaw, "the great dacoit" who inhabited the mountains beyond Peshawar, Seyed's birth place (Abdullah, 1965, 46; Gooneratne, 1992, 118). Significantly, as soon as she hears him use Punjabi, Nimmi switches languages too. Additionally, in "The Outlaws" Nimmi observes and makes running commentary on Seyed's many linguistic choices during the day; he has his own way of speaking English but sings quali songs to the baby (44); he tells Nimmi they should speak English together but lovingly speaks Punjabi to his horse (45) and, at the conclusion of the story, as Uncle Seyed smells the curry emanating from home, Abdullah chooses to underscore their day-long linguistic game-playing in the following exchange:

"We live and we eat," he said in Punjabi. "It is good to live in Australia."

"We live and we eat," I said to him in English.

"Is good?" said Uncle Seyed, remembering. "Is good," said Uncle Seyed in his sort of English, "to speak English like me?" (Abdullah, 1965, pp. 54-55)

Read as wisdom literature, the effect of this passage is to intimate that to be successful in Australian terms you must learn to speak English, in addition to your own community languages, and that possessing such a wealth of languages creates opportunities to play in and between them.

In "The Child that Wins" (Abdullah, 1965, pp. 68-77) linguistic choice denotes a change in status and personal circumstances. In this story, a family friend, a young Muslim man, returns to visit, bringing news of his engagement to an Australian girl. Because Hussein has been away and has made, he feels, adult and contentious decisions, he greets Nimmi's mother very formally, in the mode of an adult Muslim male, without touching her:

“Salaam Aleikum,” he said.

Ama must have been surprised. She took what seemed to be a long time before she answered. She must have been searching her mind for the Punjabi answer—“And peace be with you.”

“W’aleikum salaam,” she said at last. Then she broke into English, laughing. “But Hussein, my son, why so polite, so thoughtless? That is not our language, is not yours. What has happened to the Australian boy who shakes hands with the ladies and says, “how do you do?” (Abdullah, 1965, p. 69)

In this passage Ama draws attention to the fact that Hussein has not performed for her the English language and Australian version of himself that she had become accustomed to in her previous dealings with him. Her response suggests that Hussein has, in the company of her family, always shared in a friendly Australian-English where formalities, predicated on old world hierarchies, are seldom employed. Standing secure in her own Punjabi/Brahmin/Muslim/Australian hybridity, Ama is accustomed now to shaking hands; Hussein’s newly acquired Muslim reserve unsettles her. The story that unfolds from this point is one that depicts the difficulties faced by second generation young people; Hussein, a Muslim, has chosen an Anglo-Celtic Australian bride. His parents, first generation migrants attempting to hold fast to the traditions in which they were reared, do not approve. In his distress, Hussein has turned to the only intermarried couple he knows for advice.

Of all the stories in the collection, “The Child that Wins” is perhaps the most prescriptive in that it details how Hussein should go about things in order to effect a happy, second generation outcome for a contained and separate nuclear family. Standing in opposition to this story are “Because of the Rusilla” and “Grandfather Tiger” which have been identified previously and within the Anglo-Celtic/Migrant binary as encounter and conflict stories (Gooneratne, 1992, 119). I will discuss the ways in which these two stories teach hybridity and underscore the importance of resisting assimilation, suggesting that it is possible to retain one’s own culture and sense of self while negotiating Australian life.

### 2.1.3 Hybridity, Encounter and Conflict

“Because of the Rusilla” concerns the children’s first trip to town and two encounters with Anglo-Celtic Australians. The first interaction takes place outdoors, where the children have been asked to wait in the shade, by the roadside. Initial taunts segue into a sing-song: “Nigger, nigger, pull the trigger” and then Lal, the youngest and the only boy, bent on making a game with these new friends, is sent sprawling to the ground. His sisters, forgetting all the manners they have been taught, launch



themselves at the White Australian opposition, “thumping and kicking and scratching” (pp. 16-17). Not before time, Seyed arrives and the Punjabi children are whisked away. As Gooneratne notes the story might have ended there (1992, 121), leaving the children puzzled and upset, but it does not. Seyed takes the children instead to visit a “white lady” (Abdullah, 1965, p. 17) where they are comforted by her wise hospitality and exposed to a different aspect of European culture. Her sitting room contains magazines and a piano. Her kitchen contains a whistling kettle and a cat. Each of the children engages with one of these discoveries in an exploratory manner so that on leaving they have gained a new awareness and knowledge of the way that White Australian people live. Significantly the white woman represented here gifts Lal a whistling kettle which he associates with his pet Rosella, recently flown away. While in the act of giving, this woman betrays her association with Seyed and their father in past times, as well as a significant degree of cross-cultural awareness, when she interprets Lal’s response to her present in Punjabi cultural terms:

We were all at the wagon ready to go when she came out. She was carrying the kettle.

“This is for you,” she said and held it towards Lal. “I have two others for myself.”

Lal took it, but Seyed was frowning at him and he half held it out for her to take back.

Even Lal knew that Punjabi men do not accept gifts easily.

“Let him take it,” said the lady. “A friend gives you what is already your own.”

Seyed thought about it and then smiled, a huge grin. “You Punjabi lady,” he said.

So the kettle was Lal’s. (Abdullah, 1965, pp. 19-20)

Instead of assuming that Lal is shy or quiet, and therefore reticent about accepting a gift, this Australian woman recognises the moment for what it is—an awkward transaction in Punjabi cultural terms. She appears to have garnered sufficient Punjabi knowledge of her own to smooth things over with a good humour and folkloric wisdom that Seyed appreciates. Abdullah provides us here with a positive vision of a multi-cultural Australia, in which immigrants are met halfway by White Australians who themselves seek to develop their cultural competence.

Similarly, in “Grandfather Tiger” (Abdullah, 1965, pp. 93-100), Joti, the young protagonist, encounters an Anglo-Celtic setting for the first time when she commences school. The wisdom figure in this story is Joti’s “Grandfather Tiger” who appears in the story as part imaginary friend, part the spirit of her Grandfather—recently deceased—and part animal totem. On her first day, Joti is met by a teacher who insists on calling her Josie and is uncertain how to manage her within the confines of the Australian education system at the time:

her enrolment card was going to be a worry. The cards had a space to tick for “Australian” and another space to tick for “New Australian.” What was to be done with a dark-faced Indian child who was a second generation Australian?

(Abdullah, 1965, p. 96)

Additionally, the White Australian children in this story are represented as unresponsive to the needs of a young Indian girl starting school; they tease her about her food and make it clear that they do not wish to be friends with her. After her first day Joti, who had hitherto thought of school as an exciting adventure, is angry and despondent. She turns to Grandfather Tiger for advice. Already he has intimated to her that a girl, like Joti, who wears *sulwa* and *kameez* and lives in “a home that’s different” (p. 94) cannot expect to put a dress on to go to school and “be the same.” (p. 92). Grandfather Tiger tells her that she must learn to accept the children as they are, and they will accept her. “If you run you will fail. If you fight you will fall. You must only accept” (p. 97). Joti, he advises, must be patient and brave, “but when they accept you they will accept you for always” (p. 97). In the meantime, Joti must not let the teacher call her Josie and she must wear her own clothes. Following his advice, Joti returns to school the next day wearing “her own name and her own clothes” (p. 98). Significantly Joti’s problems are echoed by a secondary narrative contained within “Grandfather Tiger.” Discussing affairs in India subsequent to partition, Joti’s father (Raj) expresses his dual allegiance and is checked in the following dialogue with Ram-Sukal;

“I thought,” said Ram-Sukal, “that you were an Australian.”

“I am. I was born here,” said Raj. “But my people—”

“Your people,” said Ram-Sukal. “I have been back and I have seen your people. There is a line through your father’s village. Who are your people? Are you Indian or Pakistani? They will kill you if you do not know.”

“Old friend,” said Raj, shamefaced, “old friend, you are always right and always wise. But what are we to do? I belong here. I am Australian, but who will believe me? My skin, my face, my thinking contradicts me, and who will accept me—or my children?” [...]

“Accept you!” said Grandmother. “You talk like a child. It is you that must accept.”

(Abdullah, 1965, p. 100)

From this passage it can be seen that Raj struggles to find acceptance as an Australian and additionally, having been away from India for so long and at such a critical moment in India’s history, he cannot accurately conceive of his people or his place there any longer either.

The final story that I will explore here is entitled, “Kumari” (Abdullah, 1965, pp. 21-28). This fable-like work is positioned third in the collection and establishes a simple analogy that inflects the thematic development of “Grandfather Tiger”. “Kumari”, (princess in Hindi) is a fox cub that the children find orphaned near the trap and raise by hand until she becomes too old to keep as a pet. Kumari yearns for her freedom and, though the children are heartbroken to let her go, they release her to live in the wild. “She knows now that we are not her kind and that this is not her life, says Father” (Abdullah, 1965, p. 25). Sadly, Kumari has not learned the predatory skills necessary to survive after release and returns to the farm to feed on the family chickens. Nimmi’s father is forced to shoot her and she is buried with fitting solemnity. In the discussions prior to her release and following her death the children employ the word “nigger”, an American word imported into the Australian context and first made available to them by the Anglo-Celtic children they encountered on their trip to town in “Because of the Rusilla” (16). Out of context and with no appropriate referents or adult explanation the children do not understand this word and use it as if it meant “outcast”—one who does not belong anywhere.

Positioned directly before “Mirbani”, a story which is strongly imbued with Indian tradition and values, “Kumari” operates as a powerful analogy; the children themselves are effectively living an “almost enclosed existence,” an Indian life in Australia (Abdullah as cited in Gooneratne, 1992, p. 116). If they are to survive away from home, they will need to develop and deploy considerable cultural competence and a willingness to perform multiple subjectivities. Some critics would insist that this story impels the children toward assimilation, lest they be neither one thing or the other (as Kumari is). However, I would suggest that this story underscores the importance of understanding and respecting your heritage as a starting point for negotiating hybridity. Significantly, in the last line of the story Father eschews his working life in Australia for time spent within the bonds of his Indian family: “And that morning Father did not go out to work in the paddocks. He sat on the veranda with Anna and talked to her about India” (p. 28).

In conclusion, Mena Abdullah and Ray Mathew’s short story collection, *Time of the Peacock* is based on autobiographical material from Abdullah’s life woven into short fable-like forms which evidence a fluidity and negotiation of self that stems not solely from direct contact between Anglo-Celtic and Migrant, but from the cross-cultural challenges of growing up within a Punjabi/Muslim/Hindu family unit where several different languages and traditions come together on a daily basis. Two of the stories, “The Time of the Peacock” and “Mirbani”, depict the explicit intergenerational transmission of skills relating to “tactical hybridity” within Nimmi’s family unit prior to the children encountering Anglo-Celtic Australia. In the latter story “Mirbani”, as well as in “The Outlaws” and “The Child that Wins”, linguistic dexterity is depicted as being an integral and necessary aspect of one’s hybridity in a Punjabi-Australian setting.

Given that the stories were written while assimilation rather than multiculturalism was the norm, it is significant that “Grandfather Tiger” and “Kumari” deal explicitly with the implications of pretending to be someone other than who you are and infer that holding fast to your culture—resisting complete assimilation—is the best way to maintain your ethnic, cultural and personal identity while becoming Australian.

While Mena Abdullah’s stories are often viewed as Migrant or wisdom literature, designed to provide advice to newcomers, especially those arriving from South Asia, they can also be viewed as innovative, even as a precursor to the autofiction of today. In particular Abdullah’s use of first-person narration for all but two of the stories (these are told in third person) makes her work interesting in this regard. I will explore the relationship between autofiction and migrant writing further in Part Four of the exegesis. The remaining section of Section Two will consider hybridity and hybrid writing practice in relation to the early short fiction of Elizabeth Jolley.

## 2.2 Hybrid Characters and Hybrid Story-Making Practice in Three Stories by Elizabeth Jolley

The part played by the experiences of migration and exile in Elizabeth Jolley’s fiction has been widely investigated. Equally important is the fact that the sense of being a displaced half-belonging person, which she shares with her characters was felt by Jolley before migration itself, in early childhood, due to her half-Austrian and half English Quaker origins. (Pietropoli, 1991, p. 147).

So writes Cecilia Pietropoli in her essay, “A Passage to Australia: Images and Metaphors of a Culture Clash” (1991). The “sense of being a displaced half-belonging person” is what interests me here. Both Elizabeth Jolley and Mena Abdullah experienced more than one significant boundary crossing experience. What I term the hybrid sensibility of these two women writers stems not only from the fact of migration itself but from aspects of their own and their parents’ lived experience prior to, or in addition to, migration. Significantly, Jolley first had her stories published in book form in Australia when two of them were included in *New Country* in 1976, an anthology out of Fremantle Arts Centre Press (Bennett 214). Similarly, three of the short stories Elizabeth Jolley published in her first collection, *Five Acre Virgin*, in 1976 may be read as a series concerned primarily with transplantation, loss and a longing to belong or, as Jolley herself put it in the “Author’s Note”, they are: “a re-enactment of the reality of transplantation and chosen exile experienced vicariously during childhood” (Jolley, 1976, p. 10).

In a tape recorded interview with Kate Grenville and Sue Woolfe for *Making Stories* Jolley described in greater detail the explicit relationship between these early stories, the people in her novel,

*Milk and Honey*, and her experiences growing up as an adolescent girl of Austrian heritage in Great Britain:

I used to come home from boarding school and my mother and father were looking after people just before the war who'd escaped from Europe and the house would often hold refugees [...] And my sister and I would have to sleep on the floor or the couch because our rooms were being used. We would hear people crying in the night and that kind of thing and I suppose that goes into your mind and may come out much later in a different form. (Jolley to Woolfe and Grenville, MLOH, n.d.)

In this chapter I will make a close reading of “Outink to Uncle’s Place” (Jolley, 1976, pp. 83-91) “Bill Sprockett’s Land” (Jolley, 1976, pp. 141-151) and “A Hedge of Rosemary” (Jolley, 1979, pp. 99-107). I will argue that by reading these stories in the context of their initial positioning, rather than in relation to the novels that came later, they may be read as a series of migrant portraits—each exploring the complex and difficult experience of European immigrant men adjusting to life in Western Australia. I will also consider the ways in which the stories are developed through a hybrid process described by Jolley as “exploring and inventing” (Grenville & Woolfe, 1993, p. 157) and discuss her use of autobiographical material in the story-making process. Initially I will explore the way that the themes carried by each story are amplified by Jolley’s decision to position them side by side, particularly in her first collection, *Five Acre Virgin*.

Although the foregrounding of migrant issues in Elizabeth Jolley’s first two collections of short fiction has been previously noted by critics (Riemer, 1983; Prentice, 1991; Salzman, 1991; Milech & Dibble, 2010) the relative inaccessibility of Jolley’s short stories today makes it less apparent to the contemporary reader. Suburban branches of the State Library of Western Australia can no longer supply readers with a copy of either of Jolley’s first two short fiction collections, *Five Acre Virgin* or *The Travelling Entertainer* (Fremantle Art Centre Press, 1976 and 1979), though there are reference copies available to view at the State Library itself. Today, readers are more likely to have encountered Jolley’s early stories within the covers of *The Fellow Traveller*, a collected works edited by Barbara Milech and published by Penguin in 1997. This volume encompasses a selection of stories from the first two volumes as well as from *Woman in a Lampshade*, Jolley’s third collection originally published in 1983. Unfortunately, none of the immigrant stories from *Five Acre Virgin* appear here, instead the collection anticipates the dark humour and structural innovation of Jolley’s novels. For the purpose of this study, which aims to be contextual, I will refer to the stories as they originally appeared, and as they were positioned within the Fremantle Arts Centre Press editions *Five Acre Virgin* (1976) and *The Travelling Entertainer* (1979).

### 2.2.1 'Outink to Uncle's Place' and 'Bill Sprockett's Land'.

"Outink to Uncle's Place" in *Five Acre Virgin* (Jolley, 1976, pp. 83-91) centres on Uncle Bernard Oons, as observed and narrated in the first-person from the periphery by Claus, his nephew. Claus was inspired to come out to Western Australia by his Uncle's optimistic letters. Described in the story as "little ships of blue paper" (p. 84), Uncle Bernard's letters contained only the good news, nothing of the hardship of setting up as a macaroni salesman; no description of the bleak, cold rented rooms, nothing of the monotony of boiled macaroni dinners.

Jolley's chosen point-of-view enables the reader to view Uncle Bernard's determined optimism at one remove and to experience through Claus the conflict that migrants from Europe felt when seeking to reconcile optimistic reportage, accessed at home in Holland, with the stark reality of establishing a new life in Australia. Although some critics have suggested that the chosen point-of-view for this story reduces the complexity of Uncle Bernard's character (Milech & Dribble, 9) it enables the reader to view Bernard through the eyes of the despondent Claus and to feel and think with Claus himself. This lends the story internal tension and more effectively presents the reader with the fundamental problem faced by new migrants to Australia, namely the gap between expectation and reality.

Uncle Bernard chooses to speak English to his nephew, rather than their native Dutch, and focuses on the possibilities of the new country. He is optimistic and forward looking while Claus is gloomy and struggles with "the bitterness of homesickness" (Jolley, 1976, p. 84), frequently slipping into Dutch and recalling how pleasant his life was "back home in Holland" (p.84). When Claus complains that he cannot find a job, Uncle Bernard stops him saying: "We got nice room. You find job. So!" And he snapped his fingers showing me how easily I would find work. "Is always hard at first" (p. 84).

Uncle Bernard's comforting words are designed to buoy the young man and to help him focus on his new life in Australia. However, unbeknown to Uncle Bernard, just the sound of his relative's voice conjures up for Claus "the bakehouse back home" (p. 84) and the young man slips back into his memories of a place where he was fully his Dutch self.

Forging ahead with his aspirations, Uncle Bernard enters into a series of activities designed to help him realise his dream of becoming a successful landowner and vintner. Firstly he sells macaroni door to door to earn the money he will need to buy land, secondly he makes a study of the growing of grapes and of winemaking and thirdly he makes regular trips out to his land to see what is available for purchase. All of this activity is conveyed to us by Claus in such a way as to suggest that Uncle Bernard is a self-deluding dreamer; Uncle Bernard's studies are represented to Claus and to the reader as a series of elaborate games; poetry is made from a catalogue of soil types and the

possibilities for naming wines, and the wine labels, already designed, are kept in a separate exercise book, “lavishly embellished with inky maidens entwined with grape vines and marked with improbable dates” (p. 86). The culmination of Uncle Bernard’s games is a weekend treat: an “outink to my place”. (p. 85)

Claus’s reaction to the apparent news that Uncle Bernard already has property is to be comforted, and tellingly conveys the belief of many migrants, including Jolley herself (1992, 137), that land ownership and working the land is what assimilates you into Australian society. Prentice suggests that, “Jolley’s works constitute a process of writing herself into the land as she writes about characters who attempt to do the same” (1991, p. 2). Uncle Bernard gives Claus the impression that he owns land, however, the narrative turn of this story depends upon our discovering that Uncle Bernard is still dreaming and does not, in fact own the land they are looking at, or any other piece of land. In the final passages of the story the landscape and elements within it are utilised by Jolley to make visible the feelings of the protagonists:

I stared at Uncle Bernard standing there in the golden tranquillity which seemed to drop from the tree. Uncle’s place wasn’t his place at all, it was only a dream he had. I turned in my disappointment and began to walk along the road: soft grey clouds had gathered and it seemed darker. Rain winds rustled. (p. 90).

As Claus feels disappointed so the sky echoes this feeling, clouds gather and rain threatens.

The next story in *Five Acre Virgin*, “Bill Sprockett’s Land” (Jolley, 1976, pp. 141-151) ends in a similar way:

They did not look down to the place again, of course it was nothing to them. Without meaning to, in their shame, they crushed little flowers, little clusters of coral and tiny exquisite orchids with their boots as they slowly made their way back through the scrub to the hired car, the prolonged melancholy crow of the rooster following across the deceptive distance. (p. 97)

This time a sound from the landscape, the rooster crowing, is used to echo the melancholic feelings of the men. The effect of this repetition is to accentuate the similarities between the stories. Both stories end without the purchase of land. Bill Sprockett, only ever dreams of owning land and writes back to his father in the Black Country of a fictional purchase, maintaining the pretence through elaborately descriptive letters, until the father himself arrives in Western Australia to discover that Bill’s relationship with the land has been constituted solely “by his gaze” (Prentice, 1991, p.8).

Furthermore, Bill has gambled away the nest egg that would have made land purchase possible. Uncle Bernard is the same in that he imagines himself owning a successful vineyard, but is no closer to this dream at the end of “Outink to Uncle’s Place” than he was at the beginning. Several of Jolley’s later stories feature Uncle Bernard and while he seems more resourceful than Bill Sprockett—in “Outworks of the Kingdom” (Jolley, 1979, pp. 51-57) Uncle Bernard is depicted as having switched from grapes or even potatoes to selling his terrible topsoil for brickmaking—in “Uncle Bernard’s Proposal” (Jolley, 1983, pp. 71-81) Bernard returns to Holland where he discovers that his wife Mitzi has remarried in his absence. Neither Bill Sprockett or Uncle Bernard make a prosperous material or emotional life in Australia and in this they are representative of the individuals that populate Jolley’s stories.

Elizabeth Jolley does not write about conventional success but rather about those who do not make it. In a personal essay she wrote:

No one comes out on top in my fiction [...] but they all [...] would endorse the apostle’s injunction, “and having done all to stand”. Rilke accepted this same response in a requiem he wrote for a young poet who unexpectedly committed suicide. The poem ends, “Wer spricht von Siegen? Uberstehn ist alles”—Who talks of victory? To hold out is all. (Jolley, 1992, p. 59)

Although Jolley’s initial reference point in this passage is biblical and Germanic, she is describing an aspect of her writing that resonated strongly with those seeking to build an Australian national literature in this period. As Milech and Dibble note, Jolley’s early characters are:

battlers in Australian terms, or “discarded” and “discarders” (‘feckless’) in Jolley’s terms. Many of them are homeless in the sense that they live in rented rooms or are patients in hospitals or nursing/old-age homes; some desperately seeking to own land, often to marry or reunite with family. (Milech & Dibble, 2010, p. 9)

### 2.2.2 ‘A Hedge of Rosemary.’

“A Hedge of Rosemary” in *The Travelling Entertainer* (Jolley, 1979, pp. 99-107) features an elderly man, twice displaced; firstly from the Black Country of England to Perth, Western Australia and secondly from his own home to that of Sarah, his daughter. The slippage between selves characteristic of Claus in “Outink to Uncle’s Place” is also apparent in “A Hedge of Rosemary”. Dad, now living at Sarah’s, walks back to his own home each evening. Within the rosemary hedge of his old garden



(rosemary for remembrance) and the walls of his old home, now sold and likely to be demolished, Dad sits and rests and smokes a pipe and—although we are told he “did not think and remember too much” (p. 103)—it is clear that he recalls the time when he was a bread winner/husband/father, and before that, an immigrant from the Black Country, England. The repeated slipping between selves/places accentuates the theme of displacement across the three stories, as does the fact that in each of them the men are guests—either in a guest house presided over by a landlady or as an elderly person living in the home of a family member. Even the house that Dad walks back to in “A Hedge of Rosemary” is not his own, but rather a dwelling that was accorded to him because of his previous employment looking after the foreshore.

Particularly evident in “A Hedge of Rosemary” is Jolley’s reference to Western fairy-tale and story traditions; the hedge itself is described as being “nearly three feet thick” and “geraniums like pink sugar roses climbed and hung and trailed” (p. 102) so that the reader conversant with “The Sleeping Beauty” begins to think of Aurora’s castle. Only here the fairy-tale is inverted—rather than falling asleep inside the hedge, the old man comes alive to his younger self there, recalling times and places within which he played an active part, in contrast to the here and now of the story where, “on the whole no one takes too much notice of him” (Jolley, 1979, p. 99). Dad’s exchanges with the postmistress and the barber are nothing more than phatic communion and even the children treat him dismissively: “If the children had asked him he could have thought up stories about the Great Red Fox and Brother Wolf, but the children never asked him anything, not even the time” (p. 100). And again the story continues:

If anyone had said, ‘Tell me about the chain shop,’ he could have told them about it and about a place he once visited as a boy where, in the late afternoon sunshine, he had walked with his father down a village street [...] But no one ever asked him about it. (Jolley, 1979, p. 104)

Crucially his adult children, Sarah and John, turn towards the television. They “did not think too much about the old man walking off on his own into the night” (Jolley, 1979, p. 99) so that when Dad thinks to himself—“No one should be alone when they are old” (p. 101), we see not only his struggle with aging but view him as living in a world where the orality and oral culture(s) of his youth have been displaced by modernity. Not only has Dad migrated from the old world to the new. The new world has transformed itself in his lifetime to such an extent that he senses that—“We do not leave the world: the world leaves us” (Kauschnitz cited in Jolley, 1992, p. 60).

The Uncle Bernard stories and “A Hedge of Rosemary” also provide the reader with an insight into Jolley’s hybrid story-making process. Just as Jolley seems to reference “The Sleeping Beauty”

in “A Hedge of Rosemary”, a sequel to “Outink to Uncle’s Place” contains an episode which points to Jolley having made an acquaintance at some stage with Yiddish folk literature, in particular the hapless folk of Chelm. When in “Uncle Bernard’s Proposal” (Jolley, 1983, 71-81) Mrs Schultz gives Uncle Bernard two chickens and then suggests that he make soup out of the sick one in order to feed the healthy one (75), she is referencing the Chelm story frequently retold to children (Taback, 2005). Additionally, Jolley spoke of the way she wrote “A Hedge of Rosemary” and other pieces through a process of “exploring and inventing” (Grenville & Woolfe, 1993, 157), bringing together autobiography with imagined material to create hybrid texts. In her reflective personal essay, “A Scattered Catalogue of Consolation” (2006), Jolley explicitly discusses the relationship between her own personal memories of the Black Country she had inhabited as a child, and the memories she gave to her elderly migrant protagonist in the short story “A Hedge of Rosemary”. Jolley begins with an excerpt from the story and then explains how it was fashioned from her own experiences and jottings:

When he [the old man] went out in the evening he walked straight down the middle of the road, down towards the river. The evening was oriental, with dark verandahs and curving ornamental roof tops, palm fronds and the long weeping hair of peppermint trailing, a mysterious profile...the moon, thinly crescent and frail, hung in the gum leaf lace...the magpies caressed him with their cascade of watery music...

On my first evening in Western Australia I went out to post a letter, a short way along the road and round a corner. I walked down the middle of the road, the evening was oriental with dark verandahs and curving ornamental roof tops. Back home again, I wrote the few lines of description and followed these with a few words about the stillness and the eerie quietness. And then I wrote of my own longing for the chiming of city clocks through the comforting roar of the blast furnace and the nightly glow across the sky when the furnace was opened. Recalling the house where I had lived as a child in the Black Country (the industrial Midlands of England) I wrote that the noise and glow from the blast furnace were like a nightlight and a cradle song. I gave these memories to the old man in the story.’ (Jolley, 2006, pp. 45-46)

Elsewhere in this essay Jolley explains that she sometimes recorded things in her fiction so that she could return to “the consolation of memories” (2006, p. 26). In “A Hedge of Rosemary” Jolley deliberately preserved “the little roundabout of painted horses which used to be on the foreshore at Crawley” (2006, pp. 26-27). Additionally, Jolley re-worked stories that she had drafted in Scotland, so as to give them “an Australian character” (Jolley cited in Milech, 1999, p. 136), retrofitting them with West Australian

locations, peppering them with Australiana—"gum nuts and goannas"—and adding "themes of Australian struggles" (Milech, 1999, p.136).

In the Uncle Bernard stories, "Bill Sprockett's Land" and "A Hedge of Rosemary", Jolley brings together traditional story components from fairy-tale and folk tradition with autobiographical and other material to create hybrid texts, some of which she specifically refashioned to include details from her new Australian life. Just as Abdullah's hybrid sensibility led her to depict hybrid characters negotiating multiple subjectivities within and without the home, Jolley's hybrid sensitivity and multiple selves (Austrian, British, Quaker, Australian) led her to adopt a hybrid writing practice which she used to represent the lives of male migrants negotiating multiple subjectivities at the margin of Australian life.

### **Section Three: Historiographic Metafiction, Autofiction and Nam Le's *The Boat*.**

This section will consider the deployment of historiographic metafictional strategies (writing in a way that refers back to and comments upon history and history-making) in Nam Le's short story collection, *The Boat* (2008). In addition, I consider Nam Le's work in relation to autofiction and suggest that even those stories which appear to "snarl and pant across our crazed world" (Diaz as cited in Le, 2008, back cover) reference and in some cases interrogate Nam Le's own situation. Three stories from the collection will be considered here: "Love and Honour and Pity and Pride and Compassion and Sacrifice", which opens and serves as a historiographic metafictional frame for the collection; and "Hiroshima" and "Tehran Calling", stories which, though set in diverse geographical locations and cultural contexts refer, by way of analogy, to aspects of the Vietnamese experience. This chapter suggests that in *The Boat* Nam Le is writing on the porous boundary between history and fiction, deploying historiographic metafictional strategies and complex analogy to represent aspects of the Vietnamese migrant experience. This chapter also considers Nam Le's work in relation to autofiction.

#### 3.1.1 Hayden White and Metahistory

The publication in 1973 of Hayden White's *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth Century Europe* marked a pivotal moment in western historiography. This work focussed the attention of readers not upon the history of the nineteenth century but on the way in which nineteenth century historians utilised narrative modes to construct "metahistory." Historical narrative, White wrote, "is a verbal structure in the form of a narrative prose discourse that purports to be a model, or icon, of past structures and processes in the interests of *explaining what they were by representing them.*" [White's italics] (White, 1973, p. 2) White then outlines the main story-types utilised by historians in constructing a historical narrative: tragedy, comedy, romance, satire and epic.

White's insistence that the historian's process is a creative one, concerned quite as much with the *representation* of people and events as that of the fiction writer, put him at odds with the scientific and evidence-based historiography which dominated the last third of the nineteenth century (Curthoys & Grath, 2000, ix). The historian, like the novelist, participates in processes of selection, suppression, foregrounding, characterisation, description, invention and emplotment. Both fiction and non-fiction writers determine where to begin and end the story; decide which point-of-view to use; calculate how best to encapsulate the story within a plot, and choose where to provide additional detail and where to move the action forward. In short, Hayden White declared that the historian

*makes* of his or her historical research a story that appeals to the reader's imagination by *constructing* a narrative.

### 3.1.2 Historiographic Metafiction

Fascinated by the porous boundary between history and fiction, a range of writers produced novels in the 1980s which in some way looked back at and commented upon the process of writing history. In her seminal work *Poetics of Postmodernism, History, Theory and Fiction* (1988) Linda Hutcheon noted that:

Historiographic metafiction, keeps distinct its formal auto-representation and its historical context, and in so doing problematizes the very possibility of historical knowledge, because there is no reconciliation, no dialectic here – just unresolved contradiction. (p. 106)

Two texts referenced by Hutcheon are of particular relevance to this discussion: Graham Swift's 1983 novel, *Waterland*, and Julian Barnes' *Flaubert's Parrot*, first published in 1984. Common to both these works is a first-person narrator with a passion for history, a character who makes a "pastime of past time" (Swift, 1992, p. 129; Hutcheon, 1988, p. 105).

In Swift's *Waterland* a history teacher, facing a forced early retirement and a crisis in his personal life, ceases to teach the French Revolution and begins to tell his students stories which provide them with an insight into the specificity of their own region, the English Fenlands. By focussing on the regional; the particular; the specifically ex-centric, Swift's historian draws attention to the way in which other stories/under-storeys, previously paid little attention by the grand narratives of history, can come into their own within a postmodern historiographic metafictional space. In Australia, a postmodern approach to our past(s) has made it possible to consider Aboriginal, migrant female and LGBTQI experience, albeit that we now call this work anthropology, gender studies, cultural studies or creative writing rather than history.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> In her 2018 monograph, *Falling Backwards: Australian Historical Fiction and the History Wars* Joanne Jones notes that in Australia a strong reaction to historical revisionism—exemplified in Australia by the work of H. Reynolds and W.H. Stanner— led to a period of cultural struggle through the late 1980s to 2007. Through this period, Jones argues, Australian novelists Rodney Hall, David Malouf, Kim Scott, Richard Flanagan and Kate Grenville published works which served to problematise the myth of unity and make visible the extent to which colonial violence impacted, and continues to impact, Aboriginal Australia.

In Barnes's novel the reader becomes enmeshed in the narrator's scholarly quest to construct a "real," a "true" biography of Flaubert. Consider the following passage in which writing biography is likened to fishing with a net, and any attempt to write biography is rendered problematic:

The trawling net fills, then the biographer hauls it in, sorts, throws back, stores, fillets and sells. Yet consider what he doesn't catch: there is always far more of that. The biography stands, fat and worthy-burgherish on the shelf, boastful and sedate: a shilling life will give you the facts, a ten pound one all the hypotheses as well. But you think of everything that got away, that fled with the last deathbed exhalation of the biographee. (Barnes, 1995, p.35)

By drawing the attention of the reader towards the process of researching and writing a novel, biography, or history, texts such as these narrate while simultaneously questioning the act of narration. They suggest that there is not one truth, "only truths in the plural" (Hutcheon, 1988, p.108) and that the role of the writer is to engender a certain scepticism about the way in which past events are represented in the present.

This re-location of the story away from the centre (Swift) and the maintenance of a tension between telling a story and problematising its telling (Barnes) can be clearly seen in the short story, "Love and Honour and Pity and Pride and Compassion and Sacrifice," which opens and establishes a frame for Nam Le's 2008 short story collection, *The Boat*. Before moving on to consider Nam Le's collection a brief consideration of autofiction is also required.

### 3.1.3 Autofiction

Autofiction was the term coined by Serge Doubrovsky in 1977 to describe his novel *Fils*, which he declared was based on facts and real-life events (Keeler: 2). While Doubrovsky denied that he was an innovator—"si j'ai forge le mot je n'ai pas invente la chose (Mortimer, 2009, p. 22)—literary critics generally date the emergence of autofiction from 1977. Significantly for this PhD Doubrovsky, who was Jewish and lived through the Nazi Occupation of France, also described autofiction as the refuge of ordinary people. Introducing a series of essays on Doubrovsky's life, writing and legacy which stemmed from a conference held at the University of Leicester in 2007, Elizabeth Jones noted that throughout the 1980s Doubrovsky's novels exhibited a "sense of cultural dispossession and divided identity" (2009, p.3). During this period, he represented himself as being at the periphery or margin of Goldberg's homogenous state (refer Section 1.1), "unworthy of the genre of classic

autobiography” (E. Jones, 2009, p. 3). Jones noted that Doubrovsky’s intratextual narrator in *La Vie l’instant* (1985) tells the reader that autobiography is not an appropriate genre for him:

grand-homme-au-soir-de-sa-vie-et-dans-un-beau-style. Peux pas prendre la pose. [...]. J’Y AI PAS LE DROIT. Pas member du club, on me refuse l’entrée. MA VIE N’INTERESSE PERSONN” (*Le Livre brisé* 256). A little later in the same text he argues that “l’autobiographie, ce pantheon des pompes funebres, l’acces m’en est interdit. D’accord. Mais je puis m’y introduire en fraude. Resquiller, a la faveur de la fiction, sous le couvert du roman. [Jones’s typography] (E.Jones, 2009, p.3)

Despite the publication of a plethora of autofictional experiments by Doubrovsky and other French writers such as Marguerite Duras<sup>24</sup> throughout the 1980s, and autofictional strategies being deployed internationally since then, critics had not settled on a precise, single definition of autofiction by the time Nam Le’s *The Boat* appeared in 2008. At that time, and even now the term remains fluid (E. Jones, 1; Mortimer, 22; Ferreira-Meyers, 203). That said, a partial definition of autofiction is required for the purpose of considering Nam Le’s collection. The following characteristics of autofiction are proposed, namely:

- (a) that it does not claim to be autobiography but is described by the writer (subtitle, fly leaf, book cover) as fiction;
- (b) it is written in the first-person point-of-view; and
- (c) it involves the deployment of an intratextual narrator or subjective “I” with the same name as the author, and with whom the author shares key biographical details<sup>25</sup>.

Additionally, due to the “principle of the three identities” (Ferreira-Meyers, 2015, p. 204) the author is often, though not always, the narrator and main character and there is generally a meta-writing and hybrid aspect to autofictional works (Ferreira-Meyers, 2015, 206), as we shall see in the following brief consideration of an autofiction contemporaneous with Nam Le’s *The Boat*.

In South African-Australian writer J.M. Coetzee’s *Summertime* (2009) a fictional biographer interrogates selected formative years in the life of a young South African writer named ‘J.M. Coetzee’ and intersperses archival material with other types of text. Within the novel a biographer conducts

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<sup>24</sup> See especially *The Lover* (1985) in which Duras experiments with fragmented narrative, deploying first and person and third person point-of-view to write about herself.

<sup>25</sup> The above points were derived from essays published following the Leicester University conference (2007) as I consider it preferable, given the writerly approach of this PhD, to use a definition that would have been current among critics and writers at the time *The Boat* was written.

interviews with J.M.'s ex-lover Juliet; with Adriana, a Brazilian émigré who engages John to tutor her daughter; and with Martin and Sophie, fellow academics from Cape Town. Elsewhere, the biographer reads back to John's cousin Margot a third person narrative constructed from interviews she gave him previously. This chapter includes Margot's interjections and the biographer's offers to "fix it" and "tone it down" (Coetzee, 2009, p. 119). *Summertime* also makes use of recounts from John's life crafted by John himself in third person limited point-of-view, as well as dated and undated fragments from John's notebooks.

The effect of *Summertime* is not only to problematise narrative construction and the representation of events, as historiographic metafiction does, but to problematise the notion of self, and the representation of self. Just as Julian Barnes's *Flaubert's Parrot* problematises the act of writing a biography, so *Summertime* problematises the act of writing one's own life. Coetzee's novel shows us several versions of the self, each distorted in its own way by the passage of time, the fallibility of memory and the nature of relationships.

If Jolley and Abdullah borrow from life to create hybrid works, utilising characters distinct from themselves and combining real life material with material that is imagined, J.M. Coetzee goes further, deploying himself as the biographer's subject and writing "sous le couvert du roman" (Duobrovsky as cited in E. Jones, 2009, p. 3) to problematise the act of writing the self through simultaneously representing and interrogating multiple selves. In the following reading of *The Boat* I will consider the way in which Nam Le deploys historiographic metafictional and autofictional strategies.

### 3.2 Historiographic Metafiction and Autofiction in Nam Le's *The Boat*

Nam Le was born in Vietnam in 1978 and grew up in Australia. After attending Melbourne Grammar School, he studied at Melbourne University, graduating with a BA(Hons), majoring in English and an LLB(Hons). Upon graduation he practised Law in Victoria until 2004 when he abandoned the Bar in favour of writing and took up a place at the Iowa Writers' Workshop in the USA. Here he developed his skills as a writer in the North American realist tradition. (Stinson, 2013, 7). Following completion of his MFA, Nam Le won a variety of fellowships, including a residency at the Arts Work Center in Provincetown, 2006. *The Boat* appeared two years later and immediately won the Dylan Thomas Prize, 2008 and the Australian Prime Minister's Award for Fiction, 2009.

*The Boat* is a collection of seven short stories. The first and last specifically reference the experience of the Vietnamese refugees of the 1970s. Between these book ends are, paratactically



arranged, a series of stories set diversely in underworld Columbia, artsy New York, coastal Australia, the outskirts of Hiroshima at the end of World War II and Tehran after 1999.

In this chapter I will read Nam Le's collection, which has been described by some critics as an act of mimicry and ventriloquism (Stinson, 2013; Brown, 2014), as a work influenced by notions of historiographic metafiction and autofiction. I will suggest that read through the lens of the first story "Love and Honour and Pity and Pride and Compassion and Sacrifice," even the "ventriloquistic" stories reference, and, in some cases, interrogate Nam Le's own relationship to Vietnam and Vietnamese history. Additionally, I will suggest that Nam Le's deployment of autofictional strategies in the opening story may be read as an insertion of himself into the text (Castro, 1995; Ommundsen, 2011).

### 3.2.1 'Love and Honour and Pity and Pride and Compassion and Sacrifice.'

Much has been made of Nam Le's allusion to William Faulkner in the title of *The Boat's* opening story and to his referencing of Auden and Conroy in the epigraphs at the collection's outset (Gelder 2010). I will not reprise those discussions here, only note that William Faulkner's Nobel Acceptance Speech of 1950, from which the first story title, "Love and Honour and Pity and Pride and Compassion and Sacrifice" is excerpted, has become a touchstone for liberal humanist writers, not just within the North American academy but across the English-speaking world. Faulkner's Nobel acceptance speech provides one of liberal humanism's most concise statements of what good writing should be and Faulkner's message is simple and direct: "Good writing should speak to the problems of the human heart in conflict with itself." (1950, p. 1) There should be no room in the writer's workshop for anything but "the old verities of the heart, the old universal truths lacking which a story is ephemeral and doomed—love and honour and pity and pride and compassion and sacrifice." (1950, p. 1).

In the twenty-first century it is not fashionable to subscribe, without reservation, to liberal humanist universals, but any reader who recognises Faulkner's verities from the list of story titles on *The Boat's* contents page must read Nam Le's collection with Faulkner's text and its ideals in mind. By citing Faulkner, Nam Le is deliberately inviting the informed reader to enter a conversation with one of the leading proponents of North American modernist fiction. This conversation about the nature of 'good writing' and the role of the writer continues during the story, "Love and Honour and Pity and Pride and Compassion and Sacrifice", as Nam, a writer at the Iowa Writers Workshop, struggles to define his role as a "humanist" writer in relation to the particularity of his ex-centric (Hutcheon 63) Vietnamese identity, and that of his Father who survived the My Lai massacre.

Humanist universals and the specificity of Nam Le's own Vietnamese origins are held in tension throughout the story.

"Love and Honour and Pity and Pride and Compassion and Sacrifice" utilises first person narration and deploys a subjective "I" with the same first name as Nam Le himself. In the same way, Helen Garner utilised a subjective "I" named Helen in her much discussed novella, *The Spare Room*, which was published in 2008, the same year that Nam Le's collection appeared. This strategy induces an intimacy between reader and writer, the boundary between fiction and non-fiction is blurred, and the reader is apparently taken into Nam's confidence as he considers how best to shape his first collection of stories. In utilising a first-person narrator and main character with the same name as himself, thereby invoking Ferreira-Meyers's three identities, Nam Le specifically deploys a key strategy of autofiction to draw the reader into a deeper understanding of the "ethnic" writer's dilemma: how best to represent himself in writing?

In "Love and Honour and Pity and Pride and Compassion and Sacrifice" the narrator Nam is depicted in the grip of writer's block, but when urged to write an ethnic story—"ethnic literature is hot" (p.8)—he resists and one of his friends agrees: "I'm sick of ethnic lit," he says. Pushing their bikes home from a party where they have had too much to drink they mock ethnic writing as boring and full of "flat", "generic" characters and "descriptions of exotic food". (p. 8). Instead they opt to stick with Faulkner's verities. Playfully author Nam Le torques this dialogue with a moment of peripheral horseplay involving a gun (pp. 9-10) so that for a moment his narrator fears he has been shot. There is "no hole in his jeans" (10) however, alluding perhaps to the way that Barthes "death of the author" theory does not seem to apply to "ethnic" writers whose performance of their own ethnicity is expected to imbue their work, that is: "a Chinese writer writes about *Chinese* people", "a Peruvian writer about *Peruvians*" (p. 8) and so on. Elsewhere, as in his essay "Patria" Nam Le bemoans the fact that he is consistently referred to as a hyphenated Vietnamese-Australian whereas David Malouf is never referred to as a hyphenated Lebanese-Australian (Le, 2019, 66).

Names and naming are central to "Love and Honour and Pity and Pride and Compassion and Sacrifice". The name of Nam Le's first person narrator link both writer and subjective "I" to Vietnam, the homeland Nam was named for. The fictional Nam reflects:

We forgive any sacrifice by our parents, so long as it is not made in our name. To my father there was no other name—only mine, and he had named me after the homeland he had given up. His sacrifice was complete and compelled him to everything that happened. To all that I was inadequate. (p.20)

In these lines there is an implied tension between Nam's sense of himself as a filial Vietnamese son and his drive towards self-expression as a writer working in the North American liberal humanist vein. On the one hand the subjective Nam perceives that his identity is inextricably bound to his Vietnamese-ness, to Vietnam and to his father, but on the other hand he seeks to establish himself as an individual, and as a writer. The tension in "Love and Honour and Pity and Pride and Compassion and Sacrifice" stems from this inner conflict, exemplifying Faulkner's maxim that fiction should deal with the "heart in conflict with itself".

The historiographic metafictional aspects of the story also stem from Nam's desire to be a writer. Within the story Nam debates the advisability of writing a Vietnam story that revolves around his father's experience at My Lai. In the following lines, the subjective Nam notes, in the manner of historiographic metafiction, how difficult it is to represent the past accurately. After a passage in which Nam sets down his recollection of the first time he heard his father speak about My Lai, Nam addresses the reader directly:

Maybe he didn't tell it exactly that way. Maybe I'm filling in the gaps. But you are not under oath when writing a eulogy, and this is close enough. My father grew up in the province of Quang Ngai, in the village of Son My, in the hamlet of Tu Cung, later known to the Americans as My Lai. (p. 17)

These lines point to the role of the writer as filter, and filler in of gaps. Even the name of the massacre site cannot be represented singly.

Similarly, in conversation with a classmate Nam considers the ways in which he might represent himself, or be represented by the book market as an "ethnic" writer:

I was told about a friend of a friend. A Harvard graduate from Washington DC, who had posed in traditional Nigerian garb for his book-jacket photo. I pictured myself standing in a rice paddy, wearing a straw conical hat. Then I pictured my father in the same field, wearing his threadbare fatigues, young and hard-eyed. (Le, 2008, p.8)

This passage points to the multiple ways in which Nam may choose (or not) to represent himself or his father as the quintessentially "Vietnamese" subject.

At the end of the story, after Nam has interviewed his father thoroughly, and painstakingly type-written a version of his story, Nam's father takes the pages and burns them (30) so that the story itself resists narrative closure. The young writer is left aghast and once again deprived of his father's

approval, while the very act of story-making is problematised, underscoring a conversation between Father and son conducted earlier:

“Why do you want to write this story?” My father asked me.

“It’s a good story.”

“But there are so many things you could write about.”

“This is important, Ba. It’s important that people know.”

“You want their pity.

[...]

“I want them to remember,” I said.

He was silent for a long time. Then he said. “Only you’ll remember. I’ll remember.

They will read and clap their hands and forget.” (p. 25)

Elsewhere in ‘Love and Honour and Pity and Pride and Compassion and Sacrifice’ Nam’s father challenges him about the historical accuracy of aspects of the other Vietnamese story in the collection, “The Boat”. Nam considers for a moment “those sections” where he’d “been sloppy with research” but says eventually “they’re stories [...] fiction” (23), neatly side stepping the issue of pedantic empirical accuracy.

With this exchange, the relationship of the writer to history has been raised so that when we read “Hiroshima”—a stream of consciousness narration from within the mind of a third grade girl—which makes no reference to its own construction, the reader is still pondering the relationship between history and fiction, and the relationship between Nam Le and Vietnam. The ways in which “Hiroshima” continues conversations begun in the first story is made more especially apparent if the reader begins the collection by reading “Love and Honour and Pity and Pride and Compassion and Sacrifice” and then skips two stories to read “Hiroshima” directly afterwards.

### 3.2.2 Hiroshima

In an interview for *The Asian Pacific Post* (21 August, 2008b), Nam Le said:

My relationship with Vietnam is complex. For a long time I vowed I wouldn't fall into writing ethnic stories, immigrant stories, etc. Then I realized that not only was I working against these expectations (market, self, literary, cultural), I was working against my kneejerk resistance to such expectations. How I see it now is no matter

what or where I write about, I feel a responsibility to the subject matter not so much to get it right as to do it justice. Having personal history with a subject only complicates this – but not always, nor necessarily in bad ways. I don't completely understand my relationship with Vietnam as a writer. This book is a testament to the fact that I'm becoming more and more okay with that.

On the one hand, Nam Le feels a profound need to write about the Vietnamese past, and to interrogate aspects of the Vietnamese experience, but, on the other hand, he does not stay in too close proximity to that material. It appears to be a deliberate strategy of Nam Le's to close most explicitly Vietnamese material only at the beginning and the end of the collection; elsewhere he continues to process material relevant to the Vietnamese experience at one remove by setting his stories in a range of diverse cultural and historical contexts. Read in this way "Hiroshima" becomes a complex allegory. Nam Le's ground zero exploration of the moments prior to the dropping of the bomb on Hiroshima references and stands in for a story exploring life on the ground in Vietnamese villages prior to their being sprayed with Napalm.

Mayako the nine year-old girl, through whose eyes the reader experiences the lead up to the bombing, is central to Le's narrative. In this stream of consciousness narrative the reader's view is limited to the details of daily life filtered through Mayako's nine-year-old self. Through Mayako the reader is provided with an ex-centric view of history, a history from below.

The moment in which the bomb drops is the moment towards which the narrative moves, and that movement is underscored by the poetic repetition of the phrase, "don't blink" which punctuates the story five times (p.189, 196, 199 ,203). "Don't blink" Mayako instructs herself, recalling the occasion of having a family photograph taken. And "don't blink" she thinks as she looks at the photo in the final moment of the story—the moment that the American B-29 overhead drops its fateful load (p. 203).

It cannot be coincidental that one of the best-known photographs from the Vietnam war, is "Napalm Girl": nine-year old girl, Phan Thi Kim Phuc, running naked towards the camera, badly burned by napalm (Nick Ut, 1972). Kim Phuc's biography, *The Girl in the Picture: The Story of Kim Phuc and the Vietnam War* (Chong, 2001) provides one of the few firsthand accounts of life in the Vietnamese villages and, like Nam Le's Japanese protagonist Mayako, Kim Phuc was sheltering in a temple at the time of the incident.

Another striking parallel between "Love and Honour and Pity and Pride and Compassion and Sacrifice" and "Hiroshima" lies in Nam Le's depicting the effect of government propaganda and re-education in both stories. In the opening story, the Vietnamese father recalls enduring three years imprisonment in a re-education camp after the fall of Saigon in 1975 (28). Consider the following

passage from the beginning of “Hiroshima” in which Mayako describes the effect of Japanese government propaganda on her family:

little turnip. This is what Big Sister calls me. Her face is white and filled with the Yamoto spirit and I think of it every night before I go to sleep. I want to look like her. You don't become a spirit until you die, little turnip. Honourable death before surrender. She says that a lot. The radio says this a lot. Mother says nothing when Big Sister says this, wearing her designated nametag and armband and head band.  
(Le, 2008, p. 187)

Finally, the thematic parallels between “Hiroshima” and the first story are underscored through the characterisation of the Japanese parents, who are endowed with the same fondness for traditional Asian proverbs as the Vietnamese Father in “Love and Honour and Pity and Pride and Compassion and Sacrifice”. Like the first father, Mayako's parents also stand in relation to a traditional past of Eastern meditational practice facing a future characterised by re-education, militarisation and war. It is not my intention here to conflate the two events—the bombing of Hiroshima and the napalming of Vietnamese civilians—what I do want to suggest is that, for a Vietnamese writer seeking to depict individuals caught up in historical forces beyond their control, the image captured by Nick Ut resonates backwards and forwards in time and is effectively referenced here within a story that appears, on the face of it to be about Japan. Similarly, Nam Le's treatment of government propaganda and re-education in the two stories, and the characterisation of the parents using Asian proverbs, points up the similarities between the two different conflict zones. All of this serves to provide a wider twentieth century context for the Vietnamese diasporic experience referenced in the first story and depicted explicitly in the last.

### 3.2.3 Tehran Calling

In *The Boat's* penultimate story, “Tehran Calling”, Nam Le revisits the historiographic metafictional dilemmas raised in “Love and Honour and Pity and Pride and Compassion and Sacrifice”. In addition, he considers key issues pertinent to the diasporic Vietnamese experience, namely the role of the Western educated post-exilic individual who returns home. Just as he did with “Hiroshima”, Nam Le moves away from the geo-political context of Indo-China but returns to themes that profoundly concern him, as a writer and as a person of Vietnamese origin living abroad.

“Tehran Calling” revolves around three characters: Sarah, Parvin and Mahmoud. Mahmoud and Sarah may be viewed symbolically, though not unproblematically, as fictional representations of the West and Islam. In biblical terms Sarah was the wife of Abraham, the mother of nations, who drove Hagar and Ishmael out into the wilderness where Ishmael later became ancestor to the prophet Mohammed. Mahmoud is a common Arabic name meaning “praised one” and, within “Tehran Calling”, Mahmoud is the son of a prominent Islamic leader. While still a religious man, Mahmoud heads a pro-democracy party. Both Mahmoud and Sarah are torn and bring to the narrative a high level of inner conflict. Sarah has left her steady job in a law firm, and her long-term partner, to travel to Iran in search of her friend Parvin, who ran an underground radio show out of America that was beamed back into the Iranian capital. The show, *Tehran Calling*—after which the story is named—aimed to support “the complete political, economic and religious liberation of the Iranian woman” (p.219). In seeking out Parvin, Sarah is commencing a journey of self-discovery that places her in the midst of the festival of Ashura, and at the heart of Iranian cultural and political life. On the other hand, Mahmoud, having founded a pro-democracy party after the 1999 revolution, is estranged from his religious father and is beginning to think of leaving Iran to further his education in the West. Parvin, who has already been away to College in Portland and is now returned to her parents’ house where she is betrothed to Mahmoud, struggles to balance her Western feminism with the social mores and expectations of her religiously engaged compatriots.

Revolving around these three characters, with their different levels of attachment to Iran, the story explores self-imposed exile and return. What does it mean for Parvin to come back? How should the Western educated post-exilic activist contribute upon homecoming? Questions about belonging, being of a place and not in it or, in a place and not of it, are prevalent throughout the story and come to the fore as Mahmoud and Parvin debate whether or not a new piece of agit-prop is suitable for market square performance during Ashura. When, at a Party meeting soon after her arrival, Mahmoud turns to Sarah and asks for her opinion, Parvin intercedes:

“What does she know? She’s only been here half a day.”

“And how long have you been here?”

“Mahmoud,” said one of the women.

“No,” he declared, “was she here in 1999? When we went out on the streets and—and Hassan and Ramyar and Ava were taken? And she”—pointing to Parvin—“was in her radio station in America, telling us to go out on the streets?” Parvin said: “I didn’t have a show in 1999.”

“Last June,” muttered a young dark-haired woman.

“I’m as politically committed as anyone here.”

“She was not here in 1999,” said Mahmoud, “and she was not here last June.” (p. 233)

Ironically, this conversation is foreshadowed earlier in “Tehran Calling” when, during a section set in Portland, Sarah arrives to collect Parvin from the radio show and overhears her being lambasted by a series of Iranian callers. One man is vitriolic in his condemnation of Parvin both as a broadcaster and as a woman:

“I think you are ugly,” the man said. “Your voice is ugly.”

The rest of the hour slid into bewildering invective: Parvin was a monarchist, she was un-Islamic, she was funded by the CIA, she was completely ignorant. Not once did she hang up. She let her callers talk. It wasn’t until much later that Sarah learned she’d stumbled on the anniversary of the 1999 student uprisings. (pp. 220-221)

Sarah expresses her complex feelings about watching Parvin at work during the car ride home, and Parvin is moved to defend her lack of response as follows: “The thing is, [...] “they’re right. I was born there, but still. You need to be there.” (p. 221)

While “Tehran Calling” is not set in Vietnam, and does not explicitly address Vietnamese issues, questions of exile and return are as pertinent to those who left their homeland on account of the Indo-Chinese conflict of the 1970s, or following the establishment of Communist rule afterwards, as they are to Iranians and others moving between their Middle Eastern homelands and the West.<sup>26</sup> Additionally, the historiographic metafictional questions raised by “Love and Honour and Pity and Pride and Compassion and Sacrifice” are re-inscribed in “Tehran Calling” as Mahmoud and his party adherents debate whether or not the agit-prop should be performed during Ashura: Who decides which stories should be told? By whom? When? How? And in what context?

By deploying the strategies of historiographic metafiction to problematise the act of constructing a story and the act of styling himself as a “Vietnamese writer,” Le challenges the reader to consider the decision he has made to set the stories in a wide variety of geographical locations and socio-political contexts. Nam Le did not choose to write a book like Viet Thanh Nguyen’s 2017 collection *The Refugees* which explicitly focuses on the American Vietnamese diaspora throughout: Le’s approach is to force the reader to engage with history from below, across a range of global

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<sup>26</sup> Significant to the current discussion is the 2019 imprisonment of seventy-two year old Chau Van Kham in Vietnam for “terrorism.” Kham is associated with an opposition political party, Viet Tan which is legal in Australia but banned in Hanoi. Kham has been sentenced to 12 years imprisonment, including hard labour. Pearson, E. (2020, June 14) The Australian government must step up to save its own, *The Canberra Times*.



conflicts, thus contextualizing the experience of one diasporic individual—the writer Nam from “Love and Honour and Pity and Compassion and Sacrifice”—whom we may/or may not read as the author himself.

If we read the author as himself and consider the text in relation to the characteristics of autofiction which I established in Section 3.1.3, “Love and Honour and Pity and Pride and Compassion and Sacrifice” may be viewed as a classic example of the genre: It does not claim to be autobiographical but is presented to the reader as fiction by the writer and publisher; it is written in first-person point-of-view and deploys a narrator with the same name as the author; and autobiographical details from the writer’s own life are ascribed to the narrator. In the manner of more recent autofiction examples there are frequent self-reflective turns wherein the representation of self, story and identity are reconsidered. Effectively, Le has inserted himself into the text and within it he rehearses various identities: the erstwhile corporate lawyer; the Vietnamese villager “in a rice paddy wearing a conical hat” (p. 8); and the son of the father, dressed in battle fatigues. Additionally, Nicholas José suggests that Nam Le inserts himself into the Modernist short story tradition by representing himself as the writer at work, playfully referencing Hemingway, Joyce and Kafka along the way (José, 2012, p. 5).

Wenche Ommundsen notes that this textual self-insertion first appeared in the work of Asian Australian writers when Brian Castro deployed the technique in his 1983 novel *Birds of Passage*:

to Castro, identity is not something out there (or for that matter *in* there) to be found; it is only ever something that can be invented. Castro and, I would argue, a number of Asian Australian writers who follow him, write their history into being, often explicitly building this process of identity formation into their work. (Ommundsen, 2011, p. 510)

Following Castro, Ommundsen suggests the Demidenko affair (1993-1994) impacted Asian-Australian writers negatively<sup>27</sup> (p. 509). Demidenko’s performance of unstable identities called the certainty of all our identities into question (van Teeseling 2011, 64). At a time when Asian-Australian writers were already confronted by a complex and heated conversation about race, history, memory and forgetting, the Demidenko affair led “Asian Australian writers to carry their own version of the ‘history wars’ into their works, where their personal and cultural histories

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<sup>27</sup> Helen Darville published *The Hand That Signed the Paper*, a novel purporting to be based on her Ukrainian family history under a Ukrainian name (Demidenko). The novel was awarded the Vogel (1993) and the Miles Franklin (1995). Only afterwards was Demidenko exposed as a fraud by her high school principal who contacted the *Courier Mail* informing them of her English heritage (van Teeseling, 2011, 61-62).

emerge shrouded in complexity, contradiction and doubt” (Ommundsen, 2011, p. 509). As a result, Ommundsen argues, writers such as Nam Le “insert their lives and their heritage into the text” (p. 511), they write themselves back into being.

In this section of the exegesis I have sought to read Nam Le’s *The Boat* beyond the binary. In particular I have explored the metafictional and autofictional aspects of “Love and Honour and Pity and Pride and Compassion and Sacrifice”. I have also described the way in which “Hiroshima” and “Tehran”, though startlingly different in place and cultural setting, refer back to aspects of the Vietnamese experience. In addition, I have suggested that, in common with other Asian-Australian writers, post-Demidenko, Nam Le utilises autofiction techniques to insert himself into the text.

## First Impulses

To begin with I was simply closeted away at home, doing a bit of writing, my absence from “real work” justified by the arrival of our first child. While she slept, or when I could snatch a few hours away from the household on a Sunday afternoon, I pieced together poems and stories from various journals I had kept over the years. For a long time, I bumbled along in the dark between work and children, putting things together, taking them apart, reading, scratching, revising. It was all improvisation. If anyone had asked me, I would have said I was just messing about because I assumed that “real writers” did things differently.

Then I began to listen to writers talk about writing.

In particular I remember a panel discussion of J.K. Rowling’s Harry Potter series in the early 2000s. I remember Elizabeth Knox and Bill Manhire speaking and a couple of other prominent Kiwi writers and the room was packed because J.K. Rowling had just become a household name. When Manhire spoke, he talked about the way that J.K. Rowling repurposes myth and fairy-tale, and said something along the lines of, “writers cruise the edges of the global village combining things and recombining them in new ways.”<sup>28</sup> I allude to this process, and gesture to its less benign aspects, in *Trace*. In the fourth of a series of five short prose fragments entitled “Beginnings”, an authorial voice discusses the way writers collect material after the fact. The voice goes on to suggest that writers are not only quirky collectors but scavengers: “We pick over the leavings, like hawks landed on roadkill.” Be it good, bad or ugly, my process is to gather disparate things from life and then bring them together to make something new. Through a long process of journalling, thinking and imagining I transform my gleanings to create hybrid creatures which can be best described as fictional.

## Borrowing from Life

When my 2008 short story “Say world” (Appendix 1) was accepted for publication I received a call from the editor who wanted to know whether the piece was autobiographical. I replied that while the events in the story had all taken place, it would be inaccurate to describe the story as memoir. After I put down the phone, I felt less certain. Obviously I was delighted; someone wanted to publish my

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<sup>28</sup> I later gave that line to Meg, an art conservator and writer who features in ‘A Short History of Toast’ which was published in 2009.

story, and someone had found my story sufficiently authentic as to believe it was autobiographical; but I also felt conflicted.

My mother came to New Zealand as a post-war migrant, I came to Western Australia from New Zealand, and my sisters recognise all the incidents I selected and arranged into a narrative: the war stories, the up-turned pudding, Mum switching dialects on the phone. Perhaps I had not “combined and recombined” the material enough to transform it into fiction? Had I rashly styled myself as a “fiction writer,” when what I had done was repackage our various experiences of growing up as Mum’s Scottish daughters? Perhaps I should have told the editor that the story was autobiography, albeit transmogrified.

“Solfatara” was written in a similar way in that I drew on my experience of grieving for a loved one left behind in New Zealand—my own father passed away in 2008, three years after we had relocated to Perth—and I made use of my lived experience of the Ruapehu eruptions to create the miasmic atmosphere of the story.

In her article “Forgive Me, Forgive Me” (2009), Charlotte Wood discusses the way in which writers harness real life events, transforming them into fiction. Other Australian writers, most notably Malcolm Knox (2005) and Helen Garner (2002), have written in a similar vein<sup>29</sup> as has Filipina-Australian writer Merlinda Bobis whose short story “Border Lover” revolves around the protagonist explicitly transforming her life into fiction as she lives it. “Everything is a bloody grist for the mill,” thinks the author/narrator. “Everything.” (Bobis, 1999, p.128). While I am mindful of the ethical considerations that arise as I transform real life characters and incidents into fiction (Garner; Knox; Wood) my focus here is the process of transformation itself, the utilisation of real life in the writing of fiction.

According to the Concise Oxford Dictionary, *utilise* means “to make practical use of; turn to account; use effectively.” All of these phrases have a pleasing quotidian ring to them; they smell of the work-a-day world and imply that writers, like fitter and turners, make stuff; they put snippets of life to practical use; the work of living and writing are not separate but linked—the one affects the other, and may be used effectively there. The same dictionary provides three definitions for hybrid. The third suggests simply that a hybrid is “a thing composed of incongruous elements.” Additionally, as we have seen in section 2.1, hybridity in the context of this PhD pertains not only to the way in which I write (utilise life) but also to the way that the characters themselves are hybrid—that is they shift and change themselves as they come into contact with a range of others. Like the mother in Meena Abdullah’s short story, “The Time of the Peacock”, the mother in “Say World” mourns the loss of her kith and kin while rising to the challenge of fitting into a new country, recasting herself

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<sup>29</sup> My attention was drawn to these three excellent pieces by Curtin colleagues with whom I taught 2016-2020. Particular thanks are due to Deborah Hunn and Michelle Martin.

and even her voice in order to gain acceptance. For many of the characters in the creative component of this PhD, seas change not only countries but selves. It is this process of transformation, of developing multiple selves or subjectivities, and the mourning and loneliness that attends that process, which led me to write *Trace*. After working on “Say World” I wanted to further explore the psychology and lived experience of migrants across a series of short stories.

### **Hybridity, Elizabeth Jolley and me**

In late 2017 I was fortunate to hear Elizabeth Jolley interviewed by Kate Grenville in an archived tape-recording made for the book *Making Stories: How Ten Australian Novels Were Written* (Grenville and Woolfe, 1983). Hunkered down in the high-ceilinged reading room of the State Library of New South Wales, I slipped on a pair of numbered headphones and pushed down on the clunky play switch of an old-tech tape recorder. Jolley’s spry and playful voice with its unmistakably British cadence enveloped me. I was hoping of course to come across a sentence or two that would provide me with new insight into her utilising and hybridising process than the already published chapter in *Making Stories*. In that I was disappointed; but sitting there, in that particular room I took comfort from the fact that Helen Garner purportedly adapted *Monkey Grip* from her journals in just such a room in the State Library of Victoria. In an article she wrote for *Meanjin* in 2002, Garner wrote:

I might as well come clean. I did publish my diary. That’s *exactly* what I did. I left out what I thought were the boring bits, wrote bridging passages, and changed all the names. It was the best fun I ever had, down there in the domed reading room of the State Library of Victoria in 1976, working with a pencil and an exercise book on one of those squeaky silky oak swivel chairs. (p.40)

Disappointed but not disheartened, I packed up my things and returned to Perth to re-read the material I had compiled in which Jolley talks about her writing process.

Central to the creation of Elizabeth Jolley’s stories and novels was her systematic observation of life. She learned early to take the “quick note” (Dibble, 2008, p.56) and told fellow writers Grenville and Woolfe that as an experienced writer she had become quite obsessive about this; making notes first in her journal and later in a series of manilla folders, for ease of retrieval (Grenville and Woolfe, 1993, p.159 and 162). Here she describes discovering Miss Hailey, a character that would become central to her 1983 novel, *Mr Scobie’s Riddle*:

I actually saw Miss Hailey standing by the side of the road when I was driving home one day. She was wearing a hat, a straw hat with a chinstrap, a bit like a Canadian Mounted Policeman's, and she was talking to a group of rather miserable-looking people. She looked as though she was telling them the way, and she looked as though she was really enjoying doing this—tall, thin, and all these people clustered about her. When I got home, I wrote down that picture and realized it was Miss Hailey. (Jolley cited in Grenville and Woolfe, 1993 p.156)

Dibble (2008) documents this practice further, and suggests that Jolley's work is:

full of details from her own life, occasionally even the names and addresses of people she has known...she is constantly preoccupied with the family and various analogues of it, like schools, hospitals and nursing homes, all of them institutions she lived and worked in. (p. x)

Jolley herself points out that this moving things from life into her fiction is not like moving a piece of furniture from one room to another. After climbing Mount Clarence at Albany, Jolley decided that there should be a hill in the Mr Scobie narrative, but she was at pains to point out that, "It shows how autobiographical, without being autobiographical, a novel is" (Grenville and Woolfe, 1993, p.158):

Yes, I did see a hill there and I did give that hill to Mr Scobie [...] and seeing the rain drift across is autobiographical—it's something you've seen yourself, so you give it to the character. But it doesn't make me Mr Scobie. This is the great difference, that people who are not writers don't understand. You may give a character an experience, and you haven't actually had the experience, you've only had a bit of it. (p. 158)

Reading Jolley's reflections on writing has assisted me to better understand my own writing process. This passage accurately describes my approach to stories such as "Solfatara" where I have combined "a bit" of my own experience with significant amounts of information from other sources.

## Learning to dance<sup>30</sup>

Historical material, rather than life, was the starting point for the title story in *Trace*, which developed, as Amanda Gardiner puts it, through a process of “musing, a reflexive examination of [one’s] own knowledge making” (Gardiner, 2015, p. 1) and “a fictionalized imagining” (p. 1). I described this process in an article for *Coolabah* in 2018, where I outlined a writing journey that began with an exploration of state records and archives, proceeded through a process of identifying the gaps within the archival record, and ended with my imagining into the gaps in order to produce what Gibson terms a “speculative biography” (Gibson, 2012, p. 134).

I have not been as thoroughly research-obsessed in my approach to every historical story in the cycle, but in *Trace*’s title story it seemed important to stay as close to the facts as I could, to give voice to the experience of Kate Teehan, the real-life Eva, and to produce a literary response to her death that made sense of what we know of her experience. Similarly, in writing “Saltwater” and “Rubibi” I worked extensively with primary and secondary sources, and there is no sense of play in these stories. By contrast, with “Candlebrot” I have taken an inter-textual approach, drawing on *Waiting for Godot* by Samuel Beckett to place the reader at an additional remove from the historical material.

The decision to use an inter-textual strategy evolved, partly from the theatricality of Lijah, a character who had been nudging at the back of my brain from the outset, and partly from my reading of *An Unpromised Land* by Leon Gettler (1993). The attempt to establish a Jewish homeland in the Kimberley is a story of sudden reversals, protracted delays, political gamesmanship and eventually despair. Isaac Nachman Steinberg’s attempt to move Jews out of Hitler’s Germany and into the Kimberley came to nothing. The story itself speaks of the futility of human endeavour and lends itself to an absurdist treatment. What if, I thought, while Steinberg was off consulting all over Australia, two cronies were stationed to wait for him in a shack near Wyndham? Waiting, in one’s country of origin, in a camp, in a detention centre, or on a bridging visa, is experienced by thousands of would-be Australians every day. I wanted to gesture to that reality without labouring the point. Besides which, setting *Waiting for Godot* in the Kimberley meant that I could stage an encounter between two would-be Australians and an Indigenous Australian, thereby acknowledging traditional ownership, ghosting the assumption of terra nullius, and raising the question: What does it mean to “be” or “become” Australian anyway?

By the time I had written “Say World”, “Solfatara”, “Trace”, and “Candlebrot” I realised that, like Jolley, Abdullah and Le, I was deploying hybridity and toying with history. “Say World” is based

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<sup>30</sup> This title borrowed from Elizabeth Jolley, (2006).

on the manipulation of material from my own life and observation of the world. It sits closest to the hybrid writing practices of Mena Abdullah and Elizabeth Jolley. “Solfatara” draws in a small way on my own experience: “Trace”, “Saltwater”, “Rubibi”, “Candlebrot” and “Cordite” were founded on the basis of research into times and places very different from my own and have more in common with Nam Le’s story “Hiroshima.” Stories like “Unfolding” and “Beginnings” are different again in that they provide an insight into my story making process(s).

“Unfolding” establishes my speaking position as a new arrival to Australia from New Zealand and allows me to reveal something of the shaping, musing and imagining that has gone into creating “Trace” from the scant archival material available. “Beginnings” represents a partial answer to the question posed in “Unfolding”—How to begin?—and presents the reader with a series of out-takes and alternatives to the stories that appear in fully developed form, together with a grumpier version of my voice from “Unfolding”. Again, I make it clear that there is an author at work behind the text, looking for source material, selecting, inventing and characterizing. In a sense, “Unfolding” was started in response to Nam Le’s “Love and Honour and Pity and Pride and Compassion and Sacrifice” which opens with a view of the writer at work. As I became more aware of the way that these metafictional and autofictional pieces might bring shape to my short story cycle, I further developed “Unfolding” and wrote “Beginnings”. Learning to dance, as the PhD process required (Dean & Smith, 2009), between theoretical reading and creative writing was of immeasurable value here. By the time I completed the “Beginnings” sequence in the summer of 2019/2020, I had read or re-read Hayden White (1973) *Flaubert’s Parrot* (Barnes, 1995) and *HHhH* (Binet, 2013).

### **Full circle**

In the early summer of 2013/2014, I squeaked open the old letterbox at the end of the drive to find a letter from Curtin University offering me an Australian Postgraduate Award and a Curtin University Scholarship. In March of 2014 I began this creative practice journey and joked with a local writer friend at the Perth Writers Festival that I was writing a book of short stories. My friend immediately suggested that I should interlink them somehow as that would make my book more marketable. I shrugged and laughed. She paid for her ice cream and went off to a session on pitching your novel. I can honestly say I never expected this project to evolve into a short story cycle. That it has is testament to the benefits of writing within the framework of a PhD program where the importance of that “iterative dance” (Dean & Smith, 2009, p. 1) between theory and creative writing is acknowledged.



## CONCLUSION

This exegesis considered two main strategies used by migrant writers of short fiction to explore the complexity of migrant experience in Australia, namely hybridity and historiographic metafiction. Tangential consideration has been given to autofiction. Throughout the PhD I have been guided by a concept of under-storey which I developed as a Southern Hemisphere response to the work of Deleuze and Guattari (1987). This was deployed in my research to facilitate a reading and writing of short story beyond the binary.

### **Summary of research findings**

Through an analysis of two anthologies of short stories published in Australia in 1963 (Section 1.3) I have shown that, rather than sitting at the periphery of Australian literary studies waiting to be acknowledged by the academy in the 1980s following the advent of multiculturalism as official government policy, migrant writers were already utilising the short story to explore the migrant experience in the 1950s.

Hybridity and historiographic metafiction have become important strategies for fiction writers in English since World War II (Morrison, 2003, 13). In this study of the work of Mena Abdullah and Ray Mathew, Elizabeth Jolley and Nam Le, I have discovered that migrant writers of short fiction in Australia utilise these same strategies. My contextualised reading of Abdullah and Jolley (Section 2) showed that they “mobilise their hybridity” (Ang, 2009) as writers to create texts: Mena Abdullah depicts characters being explicitly instructed to negotiate cultural boundaries; and Elizabeth Jolley constructs hybrid texts featuring hybrid characters which incorporate autobiographical and fictional material together with European fairy-tale and folklore. Section 3 explored the way that Nam Le uses historiographical metafictional strategies to contextualise his own Vietnamese experience. Additionally, I noted, after Ommundsen (2011), that Nam Le deploys autofictional strategies to insert himself into the text, thereby writing his hybrid self into being.

## Under-storey

My original contribution to knowledge is the notion of under-storey which provides a new metaphor for reading and writing beyond the binary. As an Australasian born in Aotearoa /New Zealand, now living on Nyoongar Boodjar (the South West of Western Australia) I have been fortunate to grow up with easy access to some of the world's most beautiful rainforests. The rich biodiversity of South Westland (NZ) and the South West (WA) and the interconnectedness of everything within those ecosystems, from the high canopy to the forest floor, has inspired me to develop a new metaphor for the diversity of story and story-making practise found in Australia. My under-storey metaphor acknowledges the tree versus rhizome model of Deleuze and Guattari and moves beyond it to eschew binary and hierarchy.

In the autobiographical section, "On Carrying a New Zealand Passport" with which this exegesis began, I outlined my own socio-cultural position as a Pākehā New Zealander with Scottish forbears and a Jewish religious affiliation living in Western Australia. By opening my exegesis in this way, I established my speaking position. This is not to suggest that identity is a fixed category, rather as Said (1993) and others have theorised, identity is fluid and changing; nevertheless it felt necessary to establish the nature of my own migrant experience and to thereby acknowledge the limits of my authority as both a reader and writer. Additionally, by describing my experience(s) of cross cultural negotiation—as a Pākehā New Zealander who grew up in a society transforming itself from colonial outpost to bi-cultural nation; as the daughter of an avowedly Scottish mother; and as a convert to Judaism—I hoped to establish that the category Anglo/Celtic obfuscates more than it reveals and to suggest that migrants might do better to embrace their fluid identities, to live wholeheartedly in the space between cultures (Totaro 2013,74) and to mobilise their hybridity (Ang, 2009, 24) rather than continuing to deploy the Anglo-Celtic/Migrant binary, according to which Australian writers are either Anglo-Celtic and incorporated into the core, or Migrant and consigned to the margin/periphery.

In "1.1 Understorey: Beyond Deleuze and Guattari" I described the famous tree/rhizome model (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987) and suggested that it not only veers towards a binary but is, in fact only one "egocentric" (Lobben in Harris 119-120) map among many. I proposed that we go beyond the tree/rhizome binary and open ourselves to the metaphorical possibilities of an entire forest. By creating a new metaphor for the reading and writing of story that draws on the wild fecundity of Southern Hemisphere forests, interconnectedness is privileged over binary opposition or hierarchy: plants growing at every level of the forest are connected ecologically to every other plant, just as stories are connected to each other.

Moving beyond Deleuze and Guattari to establish my own concept under-storey has effectively taken my research beyond the binary. It is my hope that under-storey might be further developed and deployed by myself or other researchers in the future, for while cultural workers and funding bodies<sup>31</sup> are still framing their response to Australia's diversity in a way that is predicated on a single (and static) subject position I believe theses like this one have much to offer.

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<sup>31</sup> Recently I saw a pie chart on Instagram (November 9, 2020) that had been developed by Perth's Centre for Stories to demonstrate their cultural responsiveness and high level of success with writers from diverse backgrounds. The Centre does great work. They celebrate storytelling in every way possible and their most recent hardcopy production, 'To Hold the Clouds' (Centre for Stories, 2020) provided access to traditional publication for a diverse group of emerging writers who might otherwise have waited years for a first publication credit, yet the Centre's pie chart sorted writers into the following three categories: 'White' 'People of Colour' and 'First Nations People including Māori.'

APPENDIX

Publication of single author short story collections by “migrant” writers shown in relation to the publication and reprinting of *The Time of the Peacock* and *Two Ways Meet* (1945 – 1985)<sup>32</sup>

Date of publication	Author Name	Title	Notes
1946	David Martin	<i>The Shoes Men Walk In</i>	b. Budapest, Hungary, 1915.  Birth name = Ludwig Detsinyi.
1947	John Morrison	<i>Sailors Belong Ships</i>	b. 1904 Sunderland, England.  Assisted immigrant to Australia. Arrived 1923.
1952	Judah Waten	<i>Alien Son</i>	b. 1911, Odessa, Russia  Arrived in Australia via Israel.  Lived in Midland, WA before moving to Melbourne.  <i>Alien Son</i> went into paperback in 1952 and was reissued in 1965.

<sup>32</sup> It should be noted that the first anthology of Aboriginal short story, *Aliens in their land* was edited by L. Rorabacher and published in 1968 (Bennett xiv).

1955	Eric Schlunke	<i>The Man in the Silo</i>	d. 1960. Born at Temora, Riverina District, NSW within a diasporic German farming community.
	Herz Bergner	<i>The House of Jacob Isaacs</i>	b. 1907 Radinmo, Poland
	John Morrisson	<i>Black Cargo</i>	
1956	Nathan Spielvogel	<i>Selected Stories of Nathan Spielvogel</i>	b. 1874 d. 1956. Born in Ballarat to an Austrian father.
1958	Eric Schlunke	<i>The Village Hampden</i>	
1962	John Morrison	<i>Twenty-three</i>	Morrison's collected stories
1963	Louise Rorabacher (Ed.)	<i>Two Ways Meet: Stories of Migrants in Australia</i>	
1965	Mena Abdullah and Ray Mathew	<i>The Time of the Peacock</i>	Abdullah b. 1930 at Bundarra, NSW to Punjabi Indian parents.  Mathew b. Sydney 1929  First published by Roy, New York.  Angus and Robertson, hardback and paperback editions, were also

			available in Australia by 1965.
	Eric Schlunke	<i>Stories of the Riverina</i>	This was a collected stories edited by Clement Semmler.  Seven out of the twenty-three stories were new.
1966	Herz Bergner	<i>Where the Truth Lies</i>	
1967	Mena Abdullah and Ray Mathew	<i>The Time of the Peacock</i>	Pacific Paperback edition
	Louise Rorabacher (Ed.)	<i>Two Ways Meet</i>	Reprinted by Australian Publisher F.W. Cheshire.
1969	Louise Rorabacher (Ed.)	<i>Two Ways Meet</i>	Reprinted by Australian Publisher F.W. Cheshire.
1970		<i>The Time of the Peacock</i>	Reprinted
1973		<i>The Time of the Peacock</i>	Reprinted
1974	Vicki Viidikas	<i>Wrappings</i>	b. 1948 Australia, to an Estonian father and Anglo-Australian mother.
		<i>The Time of the Peacock</i>	Reprint
1976	Elizabeth Jolley	<i>Five Acre Virgin</i>	b. 1923 England to an English father and Austrian mother.
1977		<i>The Time of the Peacock</i>	A&R Classic edition published.

1978	Judah Waten	<i>Love and Rebellion</i>	Short stories and autobiographical essays.
1979	Elizabeth Jolley	<i>The Travelling Entertainer</i>	
1981	Angelo Loukakis	<i>For the Patriarch</i>	
1983	Victor Kelleher	<i>Africa and After</i>	b. in London, lived in Africa for 20 years. Came to Australia via NZ.
1985		<i>Antipodes</i>	b. 1934 to Lebanese and Jewish parents. Arrived Australia via England.

This table was developed from the chronology of short fiction publishing landmarks given in Bennett, *Australian Short Fiction: A History* (2002); [www.austlit.edu.au](http://www.austlit.edu.au) ; and Malouf, *A First Place* (2014). I also drew on the introductory notes and biographical information provided in Abdullah & Mathew, *The Time of the Peacock* (1992 Imprint Edition); Hadgraft & Wilson (Eds.), *A Century of Australian Short Story* (1963); and Rorabacher (Ed.), *Two Ways Meet* (1963).

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